DOCUMENT RESUME

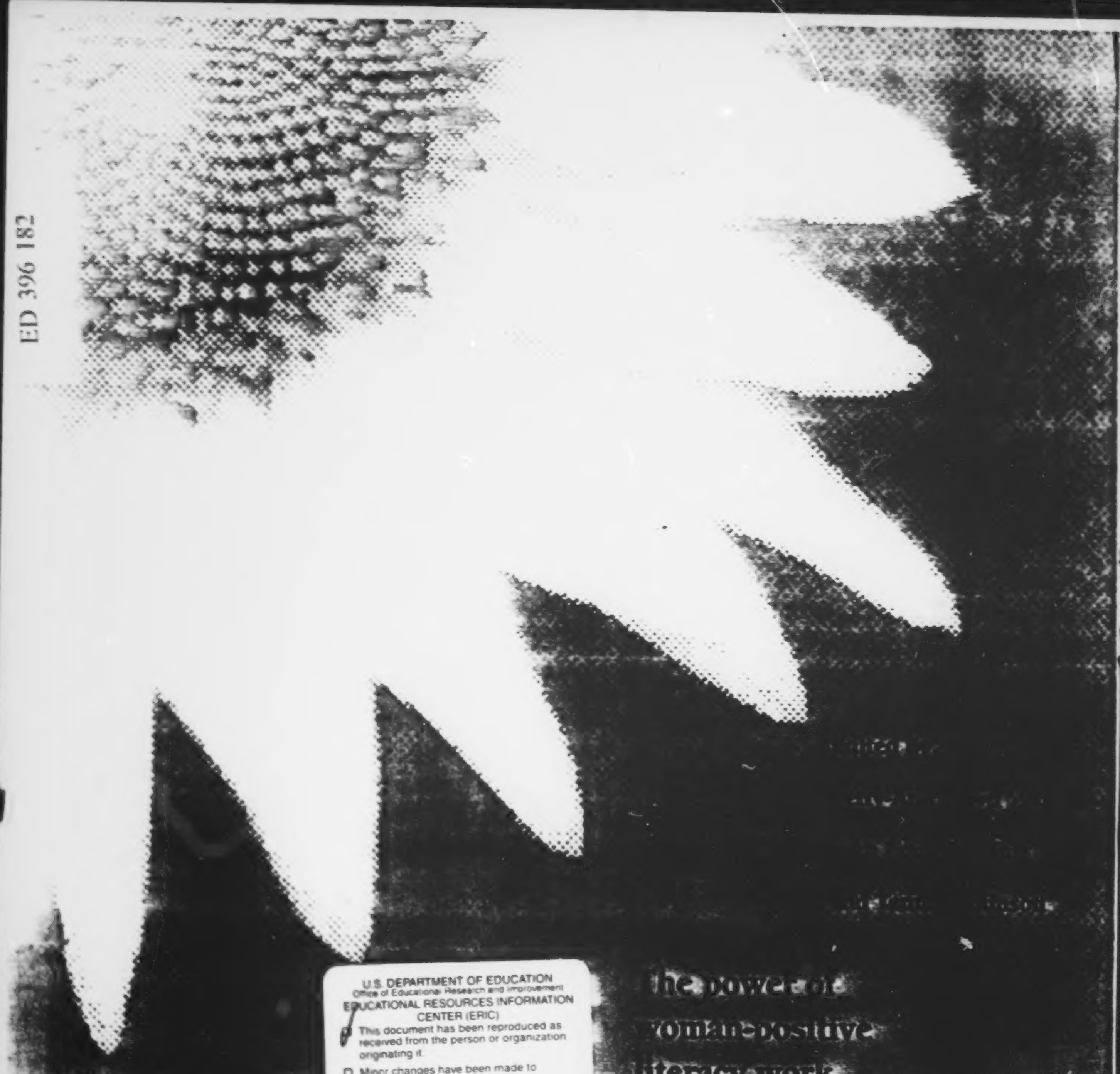
ED 396 182 CE 071 965

AUTHOR	Lloyd, Betty-Ann, Ed.; And Others
TITLE	Women in Literacy Speak. The Power of Woman-Positive Literacy Work.
INSTITUTION	Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, Toronto (Ontario).
SPONS AGENCY	National Literacy Secretariat, Ottawa (Ontario).
REPORT NO	ISBN-1-895686-37-7
PUB DATE	94
NOTE	186p.; For related documents, see CE 071 962-964.
AVAILABLE FROM	Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, 47 Main St., Toronto, Ontario M4E 2V6, Canada ($15 Canadian plus $2 postage).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research/Technical (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Action Research; Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; Classroom Techniques; *Educational Practices; Educational Research; Educational Strategies; *Feminism; Foreign Countries; Functional Literacy; Indigenous Populations; *Literacy Education; *Outcomes of Education; Political Socialization; Program Development; Program Effectiveness; Research Methodology; Self Actualization; Theory Practice Relationship; *Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS	*Canada; Empowerment

ABSTRACT

This book contains 15 chapters that were written by women from 12 Canadian adult literacy and basic education programs who participated in an exploratory research project designed to document the process and results of woman-positive literacy work. The following sections are included: "Exploring the Concept of Woman-Positive within Learner-Centered Literacy Programs: A Program-Based Action Research Project" (Betty-Ann Lloyd); "We Formed a Women's Group at ALFA (Adult Literacy for Action)"; "Gender, Culture, and Personal Experiences that Get in the Way of Learning: The Need for Core Funding of Adult Literacy Projects" (Diane Eastman); "Taking Chances/Making Choices: Reflections on a Year of Woman-Positive Activity" (Debbie Heagy); "Gaining Confidence through Woman-Positive Literacy Research" (Nicole Jessop); "Union-based Literacy Programs Empower Women Workers When They Pay Attention to Women's Lives" (poster); "Uncovering Fear and Isolation in Rabbittown: A Woman-Positive Literacy Project" (Frances Ennis et al.); "Native Women Write Now"; "Taking Space for Woman-Positive Literacy Work" (Anne Moore); "Charting the Woman-Positive Ripples--A Journal of Discovery" (Karen Bergman-Illnik); list of 24 resource booklets produced by a correctional center in Saskatchewan; "I Believe Our Lives Are Woven Together Like a Spider Web" (LaVera Schiele); "The Politics of Talking: Doing 'Woman-Positive' in a Learner-Centred Literacy Program" (Marion Wells); "recipes" for political action; and "More than Semantics: Reflections on 'Feminist'/'Woman-Positive' Practices in a Literacy Classroom" (Paula Davies, Mary Ann Tierney). Contains a 77-item bibliography of works on women and education, research design and methodology, and feminist theory. (MN)

ED 396 182



[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

the power of
woman-positive
literacy work

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
● Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
B Hawkins
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Women in literacy speak

CE071965

Women
in
literacy
speak

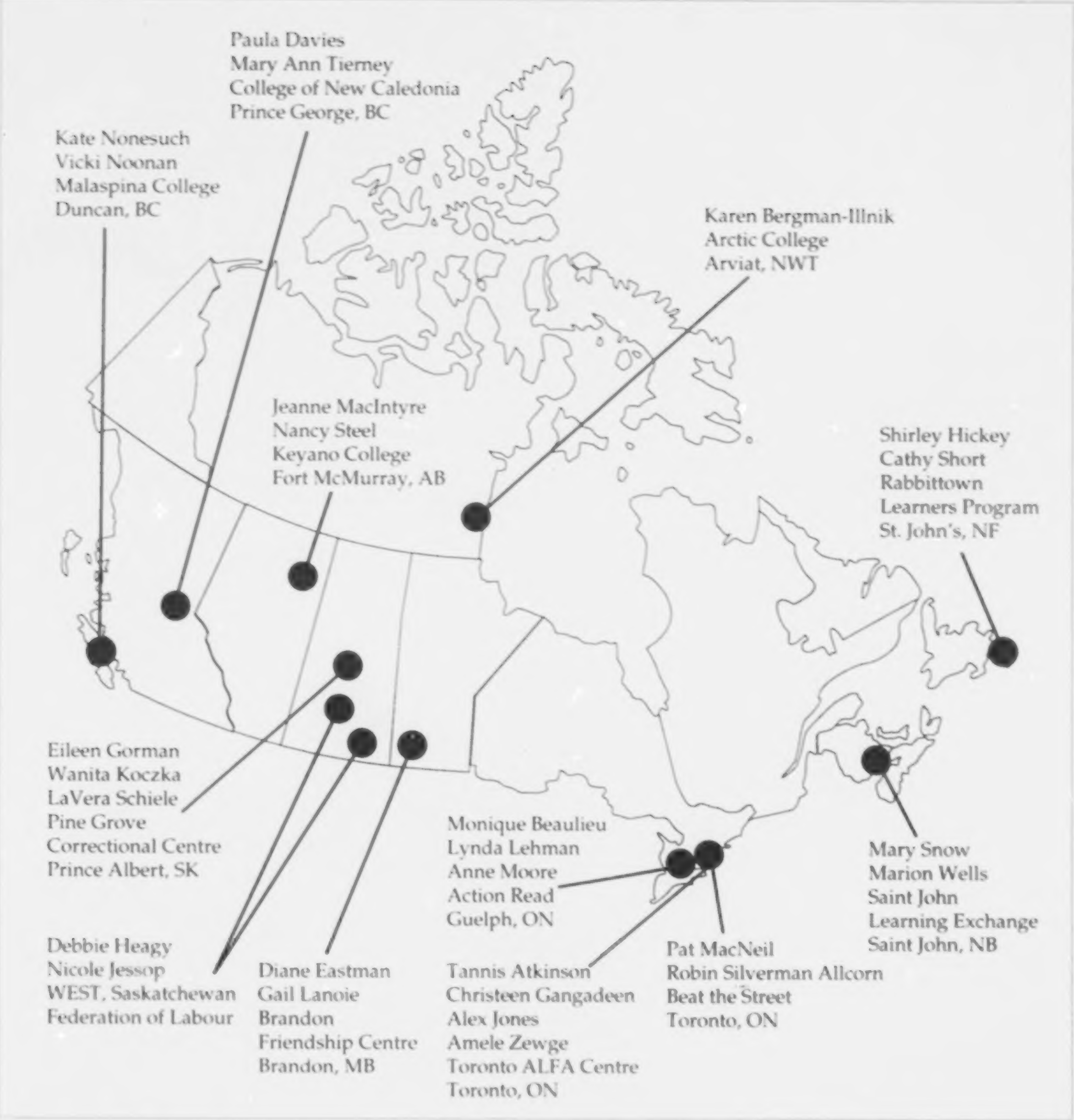
The power of woman-positive literacy work

Also in this series

The power of woman-positive literacy work —
Program-based action research

and

Listen to women in literacy —
The power of woman-positive literacy work



At the first national workshop, we went into a large room and imagined that the floor had a map of Canada on it. Then we began to arrange ourselves as if we were standing where we would find our home community. The two women from Arviat, NWT, stood directly in the centre of the room. At first, we tried to convince them that they should stand at the top of the room. They would be the furthest north and the rest of us would have more room. They refused, insisting that most southerners have a very skewed sense of our country's geography, that Arviat is at the geographic centre of Canada. At the second workshop, women talked about using circle images for the poster to recognize the non-linear nature of our work. For this reason, we have arranged the program descriptions in The power of woman-positive literacy work beginning with Arctic College and moving in a circle around to the east and then to the west.

Women in literacy speak

The power of woman-positive literacy work

Editors

Betty-Ann Lloyd

with Frances Ennis

and Tannis Atkinson

Fernwood Publishing
Halifax 1994

CCLOW Canadian Congress for
Learning Opportunities for Women
Toronto 1994

We dedicate this work to women who participate in adult literacy and basic education programs as workers and as students.

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data
Main entry under title:

Women in literacy speak

Co-published by: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 1-895686-37-7

1. Literacy -- Canada. 2. Adult education of women -- Canada. 3. Elementary education of adults -- Canada. I. Lloyd, Betty-Ann. II. Ennis, Frances. III. Atkinson, Tannis. IV. Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women.

LC154.W66 1994 374'.012 C94-950047-X

Editing: Brenda Beagan, Halifax, NS
Layout and Production: Debbie Mathers, Halifax, NS
Cover Design: Blackbird Design, Toronto, ON
Printing by Hignell Printing Limited, Winnipeg, MB

We acknowledge and thank the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development for their financial contribution towards this project.

The views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of the funder or of CCLOW.

Copyright © 1994 by The Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without permission in writing from —

Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW)
47 Main Street, Toronto, ON M4E 2V6 (416) 699-1909

Toronto ALFA Centre: We formed a women's group at ALFA © 1993, used with permission. **Aboriginal Women and the Workplace:** Native Women Write Now © 1993, used with permission. **Pine Grove Correctional Centre:** Resource booklets © 1993, used with permission. **Women's Committee, Beat the Street:** Recipes for political action © 1993, used with permission. **Betty-Ann Lloyd**, Exploring the concept of woman-positive within learner-centred literacy programs © 1993. **Diane Eastman**, Gender, culture, and personal experiences that get in the way of learning © 1993. **Debbie Heagy**, Taking chances, making choices © 1993. **Nicole Jessop**, Gaining confidence through woman-positive literacy research © 1993. **Frances Ennis with Rabbittown staff**, Uncovering fear and isolation in Rabbittown © 1993. **Anne Moore**, Taking space for woman-positive literacy work © 1993. **Action Read**: Women: Where have we been? Where are we going? © 1993. **Karen Bergman-Illnik**, Charting the woman-positive ripples © 1993. **LaVera Schiele**, I believe our lives are woven together like a spider web © 1993. **Marion Wells**, The politics of talking © 1993. **Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney**, More than semantics © 1993.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements
Introduction 1

1 Exploring the concept of woman-positive within learner-centred literacy programs: A program-based action research project 21
Betty-Ann Lloyd, Halifax, NS

2 We formed a women's group at ALFA 34
Toronto ALFA Centre, Toronto, ON

3 Gender, culture, and personal experiences that get in the way of learning: The need for core funding for adult literacy projects 44
Diane Eastman, Brandon Friendship Centre, Brandon, MB

4 Taking chances, making choices: Reflections on a year of woman-positive activity 60
Debbie Heagy Worker Education for Skills Training (WEST)
Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, Regina, SK

Gaining confidence through woman-positive literacy research 64
Nicole Jessop, Worker Education for Skills Training (WEST)
Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, Regina, SK

Union-based literacy programs empower women workers when they pay attention to women's lives 71
A poster developed by Debbie Heagy and Nicole Jessop

5 Uncovering fear and isolation in Rabbittown: A woman-positive literacy project 72
Frances Ennis with Shirley Hickey, Bella Biddiscombe, Sandra Cadwell, Betty Jackson, Cathy Short, Rabbittown Learners Program, St. John's NF

6 Native Women Write Now 84
Aboriginal Women and the Workplace, Keyano College, Fort McMurray, AB

7 Taking space for woman-positive literacy work 94
Anne Moore, Action Read, Guelph, ON

8 Charting the woman-positive ripples — A journal of discovery 106
Karen Bergman-Illnik, Arctic College, Arviat, NWT

9 Resource booklets 122
Pine Grove Correctional Centre, Prince Albert, SK

I believe our lives are woven together like a spider web 127
LaVera Schiele, Pine Grove Correctional Centre, Prince Albert, SK

10 The politics of talking:
Doing "woman-positive" in a learner-centred literacy program 130
Marion Wells, Saint John Learning Exchange, Saint John, NB

11 Recipes for political action 140
Women's Committee. Beat the Street, Toronto, ON

12 More than semantics:
Reflections on "feminist"/"woman-positive" practices in a literacy classroom 154
Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney, College of New Caledonia, Prince George, BC
Commentary I Maggie Ramage
Commentary II Jenny Horsman
Commentary III Ann McQuaid
Commentary IV Betty-Ann Lloyd

13 Bibliography 171

Acknowledgements

Over the five years that have passed since CCLOW decided to do this research study, many women have provided guidance, wisdom, support, and advice. Each one contributed to the work and thinking that went into this project and we are grateful for their involvement with CCLOW and the research.

Our appreciation and thanks go to the women who planted the seed for this project: Gladys Watson, Wynne Farr, Jenny Horsman, Riva Love, Susan Witter, Dawn Elliot, and Sharon Goldberg.

The project was nurtured and tended throughout the phase one by Pramila Aggarwal, Evelyn Battell, Frances Ennis, Dawn Elliot, Lynn Fogwill, Michele Kuhlmann, Kathleen Rockhill, and Susan Witter. The workers and students from the four literacy programs across the country who spoke from their experience and so helped shape phase two have our heartfelt thanks.

Several women were involved in the advisory committee at various times in phase two: Pramila Aggarwal, Evelyn Battell, Frances Ennis, Lynn Fogwill, Jenny Horsman, Michele Kuhlmann, Kate Nonesuch, Kathleen Rockhill, and Susan Witter. Each brought a rich and varied perspective to the project and we are deeply grateful for their commitment to the area of women and literacy.

We are indebted to the women in the programs across Canada who had the inner strength, tenacity, and, in many cases, courage to participate in this project. The contact women from the programs — Karen, Shirley, Cathy, Marion, Mary, Pat, Robin, Tannis, Amele, Christeen, Anne, Lynda, Diane, Gail, Wanita, LaVera, Eileen, Nicole, Debbie, Nancy, Jeanne, Paula, Mary Ann, Vicki, Kate — have shown us the power of doing something positive for women in literacy programs. Thank you for trusting us and for working so hard to improve the situation of women in literacy.

A number of women have worked behind the scenes to edit and produce this book: Debbie Mathers, Brenda Beagan, Brenda Conroy, Christina Starr, D'Arcy Atkinson, and Sang-Mi Jeon. Thank you for doing such a wonderful job.

Another behind-the-scenes worker who has proved invaluable to CCLOW is Dianne Palachik. Thank you, Dianne, for helping to hold up the sky!

Collaboration has been a major part of this research project. Tannis Atkinson has played a key role as writer, editor, and advisor to the project. Thank you for helping to put it all together.

And, our admiration and appreciation go to Betty-Ann Lloyd and Frances Ennis. Their combined energy, vision, dedication, determination, and conviction have made this research study a reality. Both women have criss-crossed Canada, speaking with women about the issues they face in literacy and encouraging women to explore new ways of working and thinking. Thank you for uncovering, speaking out around, and pushing forward on the issues in the field of women and literacy. CCLOW is proud to have been part of this.

Aisla Thomson, Executive Director, CCLOW
Toronto, ON

Introduction

Women across Canada participated in an unprecedented research project during 1991 and 1992. Two women from each of twelve adult literacy and basic education programs asked themselves, " What happens when some women in a literacy program decide to do something they consider woman-positive?" The results were surprising and often far-reaching.

The research — sponsored by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development — started from women's everyday experience in adult literacy programs. From the exploratory research for this project, we already knew that women face barriers when they attempt to participate in literacy education. Most programs do not meet the needs of women; particularly women marginalized by poverty, race, rural location, relationship to children, disabilities, immigration status, sexual orientation, and source of income. Different women in different programs at different times have tried to do literacy work in ways that are positive for women. Sometimes these attempts have worked and sometimes they haven't, but nowhere was there a description or analysis of why things happened the way they did. We also knew that women face resistance when they engage in woman-positive activities, activities designed specifically for women. (See Lloyd, 1991)

This research project started from the insights gained in the exploratory phase and built on the knowledge brought by the thirty-two women who became involved. With the support and resources of a national research project and other women from across the country, they planned and implemented woman-positive activities in their programs. Over a twelve-month period they observed, discussed, and interpreted the personal, professional, political, and structural consequences of these activities. They reflected on individual and group dynamics within their own lives, their workplaces, and their communities. They interpreted both the different forms of resistance they encountered and the positive changes in program policies they facilitated. They developed a collaborative analysis and series of recommendations based on these observations, discussions, reflections, and interpretations. And they documented every step of the way.

This research project did not set out to increase students' reading or writing levels or to improve their grade standings — although those things happened. It did not set out to empower women in literacy — although that happened. It did not set out to encourage feminist analysis — although that happened. It did not even set out to help programs become more woman-positive — although that also happened.

Instead, this research focused on what actually happened when a group of women looked at how adult literacy and basic education programs across Canada fail to pay attention to the realities of women's lives. In the process they engaged in effective literacy work, empowered many women (including themselves), challenged and affirmed feminist analyses, and helped a wide variety of programs become more woman-positive. Together, this group of women have documented their work so that those involved in adult literacy, non-profit agencies, education institutions, coalitions, and policy development can pay attention to the lives of women and other marginalized groups.

This book is just one part of the public record of this exciting research project. It begins with a description of the women and programs that participated in this research, moves into a summary of the research background, methodology, and design, then presents the themes that women identified during the process, the collaborative analysis, and the recommendations that grew out of women's ongoing interpretations of their work. The remainder of the book presents the material women and programs developed to document their woman-positive activity.

This documentation comes primarily from the perspective of program workers, however some programs documented women's experiences by publishing student writing. Each piece in this collection grows out of the specific context of a particular program, the community in which it is located, and the person or people who wrote it. The material is presented in an order designed to give readers a sense of the range of participants and the scope of activities undertaken in this research project. There are seven reflective and analytical articles, a policy paper, excerpts from one woman's journals, a short story that could be used as curriculum, a poster developed by program workers, and student-written material from four programs.

We invite you to browse through this book, stopping to read as pieces appeal to you. We expect some materials to speak to you in different ways at various times. We hope this collection will engage you again and again.

Readers interested in more detailed information about the research design, the methodological framework, the women who participated in this research, and what happened in each program should turn to the first book in this series, The power of women-positive literacy work — Program-based action research. It also includes the complete analysis and recommendations emerging from this research.

Readers interested in using what happened to spark discussion among students and staff in their programs should turn to Listen to women in literacy — The power of women-positive literacy work. Designed as a resource for literacy and adult basic education programs, it contains a summary of what women did and what they learned. It also includes questions to prompt discussion and analysis.

The twelve programs, their communities, and their woman-positive activities

Twelve distinct and different programs became involved in this research. They provide services in large urban centres and in the urban/rural mix of prairie and northern towns and cities. They are on the east and west coasts, on the Hudson Bay, and Lake Ontario. Four programs are located in community colleges, a fifth is based in a federation of labour, the sixth in a prison. The remaining six community-based programs operate in a range of locations: on the street, in store-fronts, in public housing, in a friendship centre, and in a community centre.

These programs have a variety of mandates and organizational structures. Some of the programs already included women-only groups. Others had never before considered working with women as a particular student group. The students in these programs ranged from those involved in basic literacy to those preparing to write their high school equivalency exams. Their involvement in the decision-making processes of their programs varied widely.

The women who acted as researchers also varied. With two early exceptions, they all worked as staff or volunteers in their programs. Several had been learners in those or other programs before becoming staff. They ranged in age from 23 to 56, in academic background from less than grade 12 to postgraduate degrees, and in experience from one to twenty years. Most of them are white women.

At the **Toronto ALFA Centre**, a staff collective of four women work with approximately 60 volunteers to provide one-to-one and group literacy work for students who primarily have an Afro-Caribbean background. The collective and students decided to form a women's group partly to deal with some women's reluctance to attend other groups and partly to look at issues such as sexual harassment within the program. They decided to document what happens in an organization that decides to provide a safe place for women to upgrade their literacy skills.

The set of four pamphlets which they produced are included in this book: Why do women need a women's group? What happens in our women's group? What do people say about the women's group? What is sexual harassment? This last pamphlet contains a sexual harassment policy for the program. An anti-racism project has also been started at the Toronto ALFA Centre.

The **Brandon Friendship Centre** in Brandon, Manitoba, has an academic upgrading program for Native, Métis, and white students. Two staff work with 12 to 15 students, both one-to-one and in groups. Some women in this program decided to focus on childhood sexual abuse by re-writing a pamphlet from a local agency that provides counseling. The women's group — called "CCLOW" — began meeting one morning a week. The academic and personal development of the women involved led to it becoming the core curriculum, five mornings a week. The instructor, Diane Eastman, wrote a policy paper, "Gender, culture and personal experiences that get in the way of learning: The need for core funding for projects," that outlines the curriculum she developed and suggests that core funding should allow literacy programs to pay attention to all aspects of students' lives.

The **Saskatchewan Federation of Labour** sponsors a union-based literacy program called Workers' Education for Skills Development (WEST). At the time of the research there were approximately 12 workplaces involved — most of them with male-dominated unions. WEST trains the course leaders who then get work-release time to tutor other workers in their union. Two of the three women involved as course leaders decided to focus on why so few women had been involved in the program. They attended training sessions, talked with women and men, and reflected on their own experiences during a very eventful year. They produced a poster: "Union-based literacy programs empower women workers when they pay attention to women's lives." Nicole Jessop produced a personal reflection on her involvement in the project, "Gaining confidence through woman-positive literacy work." Debbie Heagy also wrote an article, "Taking chances, making choices: Reflections on a year of woman-positive activity."

The **Rabbittown Learners Program** in St. John's, Newfoundland, is located in the community centre of a public housing complex. There are 284 homes in this complex and the five women staff at Rabbittown decided to visit each one at least twice to find out why women were not coming to the program. Working in pairs, they took a questionnaire door-to-door. The program coordinator kept a journal throughout this time and the staff participated in two day-long sessions to work with their experience. Frances Ennis used this material to write an article, "Uncovering fear and isolation in Rabbittown: A woman-positive literacy project." This program had to shut down at one point because they had no funding and staff had been working for six months without pay. They re-opened with interim funding, but that funding will also run out soon.

In Fort McMurray, Alberta, **Keyano College** offered a course called Aboriginal Women and the Workplace. The twenty-four week program was funded by Canada Employment Commission and focused on employability skills — particularly the Grade 12 equivalency certificate required by employers in that community. Nancy Steel, the literacy coordinator, wanted to explore working with women and decided to offer a writing workshop as part of this course. She hoped to increase women's confidence as writers by providing the opportunity for them to explore their experiences as Aboriginal women. They produced a newspaper — Native women write now — that contains many examples of their writing. Nancy also explored what happened to her own ideas about woman-positive literacy practice through her journal. As the president of the Alberta Literacy Workers Association, she is continuing to work through some of her thoughts.

In Guelph, Ontario, **Action Read** is the only community-based program. Working with fifty-five learner/tutor pairs and several groups, the five-woman collective has one staff member who works specifically with women. During the research, the program published two books: a collection of writing from the women's group and one woman's life story. Anne Moore decided to document her experience with the women's group, reflecting on a series of difficult questions that highlighted issues from her seven years' experience as a feminist working in literacy. She wrote an article, "Taking space for women-positive literacy work."

Arviat, Northwest Territories, is a hamlet of 1,300 people, ninety percent of them Inuit. **Arctic College** has had a Women's Literacy Program for four years. The part-time instructor decided to look at the impact of the program on herself, as facilitator, on the women who participated as learners, and on other staff and the community. Karen Bergman-Illnik kept a very detailed journal and, as the research progressed, she explored both what was happening in the class and how she was changing because of the support of the women in this research. She came to believe that she cannot advocate other women's empowering themselves while denying elements of fear, silence, and domination in her own life. To document her experience for others, Karen edited her journal for publication. She also wrote a short fictionalized story about some of the more controversial and personally difficult parts of her experience in the research that may be published at some point.

In Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, LaVera Schiele, who is white, worked with Cree students in the academic upgrading class at the **Pine Grove Correctional Centre**, the provincial prison for women. Six women drew on their experiences to develop resource booklets for women in crisis in different communities. There has been a great demand for these booklets, particularly from community schools and other agencies. LaVera also wrote a short story that could be used as curriculum, "I believe our lives are woven together like a spider web." Two of the students also developed a very strong logo for the woman-positive activity. The text reads "All colours (races) of women joined together doing an activity that is woman-positive."

In Saint John, New Brunswick, the **Saint John Learning Exchange** is the province's only community-based literacy program. At the time of the research, they had twenty-two staff, nineteen of them women. They believed their learner-centred, holistic program was already meeting the needs of women. Marion Wells, the program director, wanted to challenge that belief and she and a counselor began a small women's group. This group met without structure about once a week. They produced a book, Women getting together, and Marion wrote an article called, "The politics of talking: Doing 'woman-positive' in a learner-centred literacy program." The program underwent structural change as a consequence of the project. One counselor's job description now includes facilitating a women's group.

Beat the Street is a literacy program in Toronto affiliated with Frontier College and organized by street people for street people. The students are primarily young adults. There are twenty volunteer tutors and three staff. One of the women staff, Robin Silverman Allcorn, decided to form a women's group to deal with some of the sexism and violence in the program. Because of the aggressive way men responded to this group, they are no longer allowed in the building on Tuesday nights when the Women's Committee meets. The women produced a book, Recipes for political action, that documented their experience with the Women's Committee. They also worked to develop a sexual harassment policy. Women feel that Beat the Street is now a different place. Because of the Women's Committee, people of colour, gay men, and lesbians also feel safer in the program.

The **College of New Caledonia** in Prince George, British Columbia, has 3,000 students. Academic upgrading has 285 full-time and 300 part-time students, some of whom work one-to-one with volunteer tutors. The coordinator of this program and an instructor from the English as a Second Language program decided to team teach a writing group separate from the core program at the college. Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney wanted to find out what happened when they consciously brought woman-positive activities into the classroom. Their difficulty identifying and working with these activities led them to an exploration of how they, as feminists, do their work. They wrote an article, "More than semantics: Reflections on 'feminist'/ 'woman-positive' practices in a literacy classroom," that includes four other women's commentaries on their work. They also facilitated a workshop, "Making the classroom positive for women," at the BC Adult Basic Education Conference in early 1993.

At the **Cowichan Campus of Malaspina College** in Duncan, British Columbia, 300 students are enrolled in the Adult Basic Education division. There are eight full-time staff, five of them women. Two of the instructors, Kate Nonesuch and Vicki Noonan, proposed that the Fundamentals English program be divided into two classes along sex lines instead of along ability lines. For the twelve hours of English each week, one would teach a men-only class and the other would teach a women-only class. They developed a proposal approved by the administration. At the time, there were twelve women and twelve men in the classes. Eight of the men and five of the women were First Nations students and three women were Chinese-speaking immigrants. When the class discussed the idea two white men dominated the discussion, speaking very angrily against the proposal. One woman and one man spoke briefly in favour and others were silent. They decided to vote after a break and the proposal was defeated. The two instructors went on to team-teach the two classes that continued as they had before, divided on the basis of ability.

Research background, methodology, and design

For the last fifteen years, the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) has advocated for adult literacy policies, programs, practice, and materials that meet the needs of women in the context of their communities and their everyday lives. Working on its own and in coalition with other organizations, the national organization and its networks have represented the particular concerns of adult women students and staff.

In January 1990, eight women from across Canada spoke by teleconference with Aisla Thomson, Executive Director of CCLOW. In the first of many meetings, they discussed different possibilities for a study on women's experience in literacy programs. They wanted to find out how gender affects women's experiences in literacy programs, how those experiences could be improved, and how they could share what they found out with others. These eight women formed an advisory committee for the research. Betty-Ann Lloyd was hired to explore the experiences of women in adult literacy and basic education programs and to develop a national participatory research proposal that would examine how those experiences could be improved.

The women Betty-Ann met with in the following months clearly stated that they already knew what barriers women face when trying to access basic education. They did not want to study those barriers, they wanted to make some changes. They wanted to challenge the ways in which literacy programs ignore women's lives and needs. CCLOW published Betty-Ann's report in early 1991. Discovering the strength of our voices — Women and literacy programs (Lloyd, 1991) outlined the issues raised by women and invited literacy programs across Canada to participate in the next phase of the research. The National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources Development, accepted the proposal that came out of this documentation and funded the long-term, national, program-based research that became phase two. Betty-Ann continued as coordinating researcher and Frances Ennis joined her after the first workshop as a second coordinating researcher.

When developing the phase two project proposal, Betty-Ann began with CCLOW's expectation that the research would be feminist and, at some level, participatory. Based on the phase one analysis, it would also be based in a variety of programs and include an activity that some women in each program identified as woman-positive. The methodological framework for this kind of work can be found in the tradition of qualitative research as it has been adapted and extended by feminist researchers, community activists, and theorists. Betty-Ann's own work in the area of the social organization of knowledge, experiential learning theory, feminism, postmodernism, and the politics of difference added its own influence.

The methodology and design provided ways for women who participated in the day-to-day research to influence the development of the process. The original proposal provided an overall focus, a timeline, an allocation of resources, and a framework of events such as workshops and visits to each program. However, the program women had control over what happened in their woman-positive activities. They used that experience to direct both the process and the content of the workshops, and the documentation.

The project adopted a definition of action research developed by the Women's Research Centre in Vancouver:

> The systematic collection and analysis of information for the purposes of informing political action and social change. (Barnsley & Ellis, 1992, p. 9)

All three aspects of this definition — the systematic collection of information, its analysis, and its use for informing political action and social change — remained central throughout the research process.

The design also reflected a feminist perspective where women begin in their everyday worlds, moving out of that particular perspective into an investigation of how social relations are set up within our society and within adult literacy programs. An understanding of these social relations includes a recognition of how we are all embedded in our historical location and how we are all socially organized by such things as class, race, gender, age, sexuality, abilities, citizenship status. It also includes a consideration of several principles of feminist research as outlined by Liz Stanley (1990).

In The power of woman positive literacy work, Betty-Ann discusses these issues in more detail. After working through the development of qualitative research methodologies, she concludes that this research project probably fits most comfortably into the critical model put forward by Patricia Maguire (1987). However, she also emphasizes that Patti Lather's (1991) discussion of postmodern research and pedagogy also had significant influence on the design. Lather's definition of feminist research clearly supports the way the process developed —

> the overt ideological goal of feminist research in the human sciences is to correct both the invisibility and the distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position. (p. 71)

In terms of design (as distinct from methodology), Betty-Ann adapted four processes outlined by McKenna and Kirby (1989) to provide a framework for the research. Through the woman-positive activities women would uncover what has been hidden or silenced. Through reflection and discussion they would create their stories, their understandings, and their knowledge. Through their analysis, women would affirm what they found by naming how and why it has been made invisible. Through their documentation they would call out and share their naming and understanding with others. Then women would move on, using their new knowledge to work with others, to change what they could change.

This sense of working from the margins within a feminist action research framework also fits within different models of experiential learning (Kolb, 1975; Hunt, 1987; McNiff, 1988). Betty-Ann used the learning cycle to give women in the project another way of understanding what it means to do research. Beginning at the active experimentation stage, women had an opportunity to use their past experience to plan what might work as a woman-positive activity in their programs. Then they had the concrete experience of doing the activity. By observing and reflecting on the activity and its consequences, they processed what happened. By documenting and interpreting the process, they moved into analysis. Developing recommendations began the cycle once again, providing guidelines for future experiences of woman-positive literacy work.

A linear framework for the research complemented the circular experiential learning framework. It provided another way of understanding the research process. This framework was built around the three national workshops, two site visits, and primary activities during the periods of time between these events.

At the first national workshop, women needed to get to know each other, understand the research design, and learn about reflection as a research tool. They could then go back to their programs to plan their woman-positive activities, set goals and objectives, and begin developing a description of their community, their program, and their activity. During this stage, they would clarify their particular focus within women and literacy.

During the first visit from Betty-Ann or Frances this focus was most often framed as a question to help women describe their woman-positive activity. Women could use the first interview to identify questions they might answer through their reflective writing and discussion with others.

At the second workshop, women needed to discuss issues arising from the different activities and to work out how they might document these issues. Women could then go back to their programs to collect information, reflect on their experience, and begin documenting it. During this stage, they would move to a more systematic interpretation of what was happening because of their woman-positive activity.

During the second visit from a coordinating researcher, this interpretation was used to decide on the formal documentation women would develop. The second interview also started women thinking about many of the questions that structured the collaborative analysis.

At the third workshop, women needed to work on a collaborative analysis and set of recommendations. Following that workshop, they would work through a six month process of developing final documentation. There would be time for women to begin thinking about what they might want to question next.

Betty-Ann based her validity practices on four methods outlined by feminist researcher Patti Lather (1991). Her design includes a variety of activities that provide for triangulation, to establish the trustworthiness of the data; systematized reflexivity, to ensure construct validity; recycling description, analysis and conclusions to interviewees for face validity; and many possible degrees of catalytic validity.

The ethical considerations were met by extensive work around informed consent, confidentiality, the right to stop the tape recorder or limit the transcription of tapes, the right to withdraw or negotiate participation in the project, the right to participate in an extensive feedback process, and the opportunity to participate in pairs.

First national workshop Reflection Nov 1991

PLANNING IT: Describe the activity — goals and objectives

Begin to focus your research topic

First visit from coordinating researcher Jan/Feb/Mar 1992

DOING IT: Describe the activity — what is happening

Begin to recognize the questions you might ask

Second national workshop Documentation Apr 1992

PROCESSING IT: Collect information about the activity

Begin to explore the questions more systematically

Second visit from coordinating researcher Sept/Oct/Nov 1992

PRODUCING IT: Document the activity — to share

Begin to extend the questions and formally document

Third national workshop Analysis Nov 1992

ANALYZING IT: Respond to the final documentation

Begin to think about the next questions to ask

Collaborative analysis and recommendations

While the formal collaborative analysis happened during and after the third workshop, women individually and collectively engaged in analysis throughout the project. The process of reflective writing, talking about their activities with others in their programs, and hearing about others' activities at the workshops helped develop questions about why things happen the way they do. At the second workshop in particular, women had many structured, unstructured, intense, and wide-ranging discussions through which they created connections among their different experiences. This is when the analysis really began.

The second interview furthered women's analysis of their experience. In particular, one question asked women to focus on the three issues that seemed most important for them from the research. At the third workshop, women used a framework of questions that helped them develop analysis statements. They then worked with those statements to develop a series of recommendations. What follows is a summary of the major themes women identified, their response to the analysis questions, and their recommendations.

Central themes

- **Violence**

Violence became a central theme as women talked about the pervasiveness and magnitude of violence in the lives of women students and staff. They discussed the ways male violence affected students' learning in the public school system and the ways it now affects their learning in adult literacy and basic education programs — or stops women from participating at all. Women staff must respond to many dimensions of violence against women as students and staff deal with current or past abuse. Some male students may be known as current abusers, a situation which raises difficult issues for adult literacy instructors.

- **Poverty**

Women talked about poverty as a systemic form of violence. The lack of resources and services for women who are hungry, homeless, sick, or disabled results in terrible stress not only for them but also for the workers who become involved with them. This severe poverty may often be invisible since women denied a minimum standard of living either never appear in classrooms or silently drop out.

- **Discrimination**

A major issue for many women was the violence of systemic discrimination — racism, sexism, ablism, and homophobia — both within their programs and throughout society. They spoke of the need for training for practitioners and for anti-discrimination policies in programs.

- **Isolation**

Many women talked about feeling isolated in their work and about the important connection to other women they gained through this research. Some thought many women — staff and students — remain isolated because of the fear of men's response to women seeking out the company of other women. It is, therefore, essential to insist on the social nature of learning for women and to stress the importance of women workers' forging links with other women.

- **Devaluation**

Women in the project frequently described having little or no personal, political, or professional support for their work. Some women drew a connection between women's work in literacy and women's devalued work as caregivers in other spheres — as mothers, nurses, wives, social workers. In all of these areas the lack of recognition for this essential work often leads to burn-out and disenchantment. Some said this lack of recognition comes not only from funders, administrators, and co-workers, but also from women literacy workers themselves when they fail to recognize the importance of meeting their own needs.

- **Tensions between community-based, learner-centred work and woman-positive work**

Some women talked about still having an internal struggle between meeting the needs of "students" and meeting the needs of "women." They have not yet found ways to integrate their woman-positive work with the philosophies of their programs. A further practical difficulty is the fact that most women are working in programs where all the staff and students already face incredible demands on their time and resources.

- **The need for holistic, learner-centred work**

The need for programs to recognize adult students' right to be involved in the decision-making processes was important to many women. In particular, being woman-positive must mean giving the women students significant control over what happens. And given the systemic discrimination in our society, this may require consciously implementing more inclusive ways of working with women.

- **The incredible diversity and commitment of women working in adult literacy and basic education**

Finally, a theme that came up again and again was how the same issues seemed to arise throughout the twelve programs involved in the research. This similarity confirmed an understanding that women working in adult literacy and basic education share issues as women, despite their many differences.

Analysis statements

- **Why did some programs and women decide to become involved in this research?**

Some women wanted the connection to other women in the project as a way to reduce isolation. Others wanted the opportunity to reflect on ongoing literacy practice, to become involved in progressive research, to experiment with something outside their program's usual mandate. Some women wanted the resources to work toward greater equality for women. For many women and programs, the project happened at exactly the right moment — they were ready for a new challenge.

- **Why did some programs and women decide not to become involved in this research?**

Most programs simply wouldn't have the time, staff, or space to sponsor a woman-positive activity. Others may not have been willing or able to risk the changes that might be required if they focused on the experiences of women students and staff. Some women may have been interested but not felt they had sufficient support to do this work. They might not have had decision-making power in their programs. Some programs or women might have resisted the term "woman-positive" or its perceived connection to feminism.

- **Why did the programs and women who became involved choose their particular activities?**

Women chose activities to test something new or to reflect on something they were already doing. In some programs, women built on existing activities and focused on examining the consequences of those activities more thoroughly. Others took this chance to explore changes in their programs, their professional practices, or their personal lives. They chose activities to facilitate this exploration.

- **Why were some programs and women able to do what they wanted?**

When activities "fit" well with the program or were marginal to the program there were fewer obstacles. A strong vision of what they wanted to work toward in their woman-positive activities gave many a clear political agenda and helped them go forward. Sometimes women simply persisted in the face of resistance, drawing on their skills, courage, and ability to strategize and organize. Or, they had enough credibility, power, and/or support to go forward even when they experienced resistance.

- **Why were some programs and women not able to do what they wanted?**

Doing this woman-positive work can be difficult and even dangerous for women. Some women did not have enough support to do what they wanted. Sometimes their personal lives did not allow them — at least at this time — to risk the isolation and stigma that often accompanies working with women. Sometimes women simply faced too much resistance — from students, staff, and administration — and were unable or unwilling to confront it. Sometimes programs simply lacked the resources or commitment women needed. In a few cases, women felt they did not have a strong enough vision.

- **Why were the good days good?**

The good days happened when none of the women involved had been raped, when everyone had enough to eat and a place to sleep. When women had childcare, were not constantly interrupted, and were free of crises, good days happened. For many women, when they had time to think, write, reflect on and talk about their work, they had good days. Having the time and resources to share their experience and challenge led to good days. Good days happened when women escaped fear long enough to learn.

- **Why did change happen?**

Change happened because women and programs were ready for change, because there were resources to support that change. Change happened because the research made space and provided a framework for reflection, feedback, increased awareness, connection, and support. It provided a safe place for personal growth, for women's persistence and vision. When women changed, their programs often had to change to accommodate them.

- **Why would we suggest that others do their own woman-positive activity?**

The women in this research would like the world to become more woman-positive — and they know they can't do it alone! Planning, implementing, and documenting woman-positive activities can bring about changes in understanding that help turn woman-negative programs into woman-positive ones. Even doing very small practical things can help make education accessible to women. However, being woman-positive means more than forming a women-only group. It means listening to women and truly hearing what they are saying about their needs.

- **Why would some women not want or be able to do woman-positive activities?**

Fear is probably the major obstacle which would prevent women from undertaking woman-positive activities — fear of censure or punishment, fear of violence, of losing jobs or status in the community. This fear is based on very real constraints. Some women don't believe in or relate to the notion of woman-positive. It may seem too feminist or too exclusive. Others may be afraid of the changes this work could cause in their lives — personally, professionally, politically. We can only go though major changes when we have enough support and resources. For many women this work could increase their isolation when they already feel isolated. For others it might feel like more work when they already have too much.

Recommendations

These recommendations grew out of this research project but they are rooted in years of experience in adult literacy. At their centre is the belief that change in the development of policies, programs, and practices occurs most effectively when all participants in a program, all members of a community, all peoples in a nation are involved in decision-making.

At the same time, the women in this project know that change will not come easily. Any group faces resistance whenever members propose changes that may limit the privilege of those who are unable or unwilling to recognize injustice and then do something about it.

• Getting women on the agenda

Everyone involved in the field of adult literacy and basic education must take responsibility for putting women's experience on the agenda in terms of program development and evaluation, provision of support services, professional education and development, coalition building, policy analysis, and government lobbying. This will also open the way for all experiences of both privilege and oppression to become agenda items.

As in many other female front-line job ghettos, literacy work is devalued in terms of salary, working conditions, and respect. In the context of the rhetoric surrounding the importance of adult literacy and basic education, all those involved in the field must advocate for an in-depth investigation into the current working conditions of program practitioners. Affirmative action hiring policies should be implemented wherever the paid staff and volunteers of a program do not represent the students or community in terms of sex, race, or culture.

• Program development and evaluation

Program development and evaluation must recognize the reality of women's lives within the particular program and community. Programs must take the responsibility for providing a safe environment in which women can learn. Staff, students, and volunteers must be willing to deal with difficult issues, such as childcare and violence against women, that directly affect women's equitable access to education.

Programs must adopt anti-discrimination policies that address sexism, racism, class bias, ablism, and homophobia, and act on reports of discrimination immediately. Anti-discrimination should be made part of the curriculum. Sexual harassment policies should be developed in all programs. A woman's right to safety within a program must take precedence over a man's right to education. All those involved in the field of adult literacy and basic education must understand that both violence and the threat of violence are very real barriers to women's education.

Isolation must be recognized as a key factor limiting women's work in the field of adult literacy and basic education. Women who work in the field as staff and as students often feel physically, socially, intellectually, and emotionally isolated. They need opportunities to get together and talk about how this work affects their lives and how their lives affect their work.

All those who work in adult literacy and basic education must be willing to provide women with opportunities to enhance their learning by exploring and implementing a variety of woman-positive activities. Those involved in program, professional, and policy development must be able to argue that providing activities that are positive for women does not result in a situation of inequity, although it may reduce the unfair privilege of men. At the same time, they must acknowledge the possibility of passive, active, and potentially violent resistance whenever anyone threatens the status quo, and must accept responsibility for acting in ways that provide some measures of safety.

Programs must either be free or fees must be linked to women's ability to pay. They should include training allowances wherever possible — especially when equivalent programs developed for men include training allowances. Childcare needs must be accommodated if women are to have access to adult literacy and basic education programs, and programs must take into account women's access to transportation. Programs must provide appropriate space for women's learning. It must be space that allows for privacy since removing barriers to women's learning often involves discussing past and current abuse.

It is essential that all programs provide gender specific, culturally relevant, and non-racist curriculum materials. All curriculum materials used or developed should be evaluated by relevant cultural and women's interest groups for sexist and/or racist content and tone. Special funding should be allocated for writing curriculum that could be used for women's studies/feminist studies. Ideally, curriculum that does not require homework should be available for women who often have paid work as well as family care responsibilities.

- **Program-based action research**

In order for women's experiences within particular programs and communities to be investigated, understood, and acted upon, resources must be allocated to program-based activities that will explore and meet different women's needs. Action research, particularly participatory action research, must be supported as an effective way to both develop and evaluate adult literacy and basic education programs.

- **Provision of support services as a part of holistic education**

The importance of holistic education, especially for women, must be acknowledged by allocating sufficient time and resources to do outreach and provide information about women's services and agencies within the community.

- **Professional education and development**

Professional development must enable people involved in adult literacy to reflect on and analyze administrative, teaching, and counseling practices from the perspectives of the different women who participate as students, as volunteers, as practitioners, administrators, and board members, as well as from the perspective of women who are not participating. Given the experience of the women who took part in this action research, facilitating practitioners' reflection, individually or in groups, must be made a priority by programs and by those who fund research and professional development.

Train-the-trainer programs for those who work in family literacy programs, workplace, Native programs, and employability enhancement programs must include the perspective of the women who participate, and women who are blocked from participating, in these programs. We must advocate for and allocate resources to train-the-trainer programs for those who work primarily with women and for those whose programs are not adequately serving women.

- **Coalition building**

Adult literacy practitioners usually work in isolation and their professional and political experiences are often fragmented. Those interested in women's experiences need to meet with others who both share and challenge their perspectives. Coalitions and organizations must include students.

- **Policy analysis and development**

Everyone involved in the field of adult literacy and basic education must work toward understanding the inherent inequities of our education system, inequities supported by governments' education policies. We must work toward policies that reflect the needs and values of the women who live and work in each jurisdiction. This must be on-going work.

Those involved in policy analysis and development must acquaint themselves with the diverse realities of women who participate in programs, or who might participate if programs were appropriate, affordable, and available. After acknowledging the diverse reality of women's lives, policy analysts and policy makers must either accommodate that reality in policy or explain that they are unwilling or unable to do so.

Funding for adult literacy and basic education programs must be adequate, long-term, and stable to match the political rhetoric that says these programs are important. Established programs must not require funding justification year after year as if they were temporary projects. Women-specific and small group programing must be recognized as core requirements, not special projects. At the same time, funding should not be restricted to pre-selected groups of participants, such as recipients of social assistance or unemployment insurance. This works to the detriment of women.

Funding must cover the actual costs of adequate space, resources, and staff. The provision of adequate resources includes equitable fees and training allowances, childcare, curriculum development, transportation, outreach to community services and agencies, professional development, and coalition building.

Evaluation of programs must be qualitative, focusing on what women want to learn, rather than quantitative, using numerical counts of what women accomplish following participation to define "success."

- **Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women**

CCLOW should take the lead in advocating for woman-positive adult literacy and basic education policies. The organization should incorporate these recommendations into its mandate and make women's experience of literacy education a priority. The organization must be accessible to all literacy workers and increase the representation of women from multilingual, multiracial programs. Students in programs should be encouraged to participate in CCLOW. Women who are not comfortable with the label "feminist" should be included in CCLOW's work, although the organization should maintain its current feminist identification. The organization needs to consistently use clear language and non-print means of community outreach.

CCLOW should increase its advocacy and support for funding, publishing, networking, and researching in the area of women and literacy.

Betty-Ann Lloyd
Halifax, NS

Frances Ennis
St. John's, NF

Tannis Atkinson
Whitehorse, YK

References

Barnsley, Jan & Ellis, Diana. (1992). Research for change: Participatory action research for community groups. Vancouver: Women's Research Centre.

Hunt, David. (1987). Beginning with ourselves: In practice, theory, and human affairs. Cambridge, MA: Brookline.

Kirby, Sandra & McKenna, Kate. (1989). Experience Research Social change: Methods from the margins. Toronto: Garamond Press.

Kolb, David A. (1984). Experiential learning. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Lather, Patti. (1991). Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern. New York: Routledge.

Lloyd, Betty-Ann. (1991). Discovering the strength of our voices: Women and literacy programs. Toronto: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women.

Maguire, Patricia. (1987). Doing participatory research: A feminist approach. Amherst, MA: The Center for International Education, School of Education, University of Massachusetts.

McNiff, Jean. (1988). Action research: Principles and practice. London: MacMillan Education.

About the editors

Tannis Atkinson has ten years experience with community-based literacy in an urban setting. She has also worked for ten years as a freelance writer and editor and has a particular interest in clear language and design. She has facilitated several books of student writings, developed oral history materials, and written a variety of reports for adult literacy organizations. When this research project started, Tannis was one of the program researchers at the Toronto ALFA Centre. While completing the documentation she moved to Whitehorse.

Frances Ennis is a feminist who has had over twenty years experience working in community development and social justice, women's health, and adult literacy. She has coordinated and participated in several action research projects and is co-founder of one of the first community-based adult literacy programs in the province. During the time of this project Frances received the Muriel Duckworth award at the 1993 Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW) conference for her work in action research. She is currently co-principal of a small firm based in St. John's which specializes in the design and implementation of distance education programs.

Betty-Ann Lloyd has developed her theory and practice of action research over the last fifteen years as a journalist, activist in the women's community, policy analyst, adult educator, and student. After completing a study of adult literacy in Nova Scotia, she worked within the provincial literacy bureaucracy, focusing on policy development for community-based programing and action research with workplace programs. During her three-year involvement with the CCLOW women and literacy project, she finished course work and preliminary examinations for a Ph.D. in adult education at Dalhousie University. Betty-Ann's academic work continues to explore how front-line workers can use their participation in research as a tool for personal, professional, and political development.

Betty-Ann Lloyd worked out of her Halifax office when she was not on the road visiting programs.

Exploring the concept of woman-positive within learner-centred adult literacy programs: A program-based action research project

Betty-Ann Lloyd
Coordinating Researcher
Halifax, Nova Scotia

In the spring and summer of 1990, I visited four Canadian communities to talk with women about their experiences in literacy programs. I went to Duncan on Vancouver Island, to Arviat on the Hudson Bay in the Northwest Territories, to downtown Toronto, and to St. John's, Newfoundland. As a contract researcher with the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW), I spent sixty days exploring how women's gendered experience affects their access to and participation in adult literacy programs. Following this exploration, I developed research questions, a methodology, and a design for a long-term national action research project that would be carried out in partnership with a variety of programs. Both a final report about the first phase and a funding proposal for the second phase served as documentation of this exploratory work.

CCLOW published that report — Discovering the strength of our voices — and received over $350,000 funding from the National Literacy Secretariat for the two-year second phase project. Twelve programs across Canada agreed to participate in this second phase and we held our first national workshop for twenty-four women from these programs in Winnipeg in November, 1991 — two years ago. It was all very exciting. It was also somewhat daunting. Our research question seemed straightforward:

> What happens when some women in an adult literacy program decide to do something they consider woman-positive?

What made the question more complex is that we asked women to make a commitment to being "up-front" about the woman-positive nature of this work, discussing it with administration, staff, and students during the entire process. As women said during the first phase, this level of clarity about being woman-positive involves a certain amount of risk:

> We feel increasingly vulnerable because we are concentrating on ourselves as women and others [are] talking about us as women, and that becomes quite — I don't know what the word would be, we don't have a word — "Nerviness" — like a heightened awareness that has a bit of fear in it and that talks about the violence that's out there. As soon as you're singled out as "woman," there's a spectre of violence out there. (Lloyd, 1991a, 42)

5533 Black St.
Halifax, NS
B3K 1P7

This up-front focus on woman-positive left women open to an often surprising intensity of feeling. During a phase one conversation, another woman literacy worker said:

> Thank god that we can't go on all day thinking in these terms. That we just get on with making lunch. Because I . . . feel paralyzed with what we're talking about. The intensity of fear, rage, all that stuff, I couldn't live with feeling this every minute of my day. I wouldn't function. (Lloyd, 1991a, 42)

This "nerviness," this intensity, was echoed by many of the women as they entered into the research. It was also mixed with a tremendous sense of excitement — and relief — and awkwardness. We would, after all, be spending significant parts of the next two years talking about our work as women in literacy. Although this would happen in a context of on-going support, one that included a complex understanding of "community," we didn't know what we could expect from each other, from our programs, or from ourselves.

The women who participated in this project have outlined their experience of this process in The power of woman-positive literacy work: Program-based action research, a book that includes a detailed outline of the research process, descriptions of the various woman-positive activities in the context of their programs and communities, and a collaborative analysis of the project as a whole. The writings in this book focus on issues that became important for us personally, professionally, and politically during the research process.

In this article, I have adapted a paper first delivered in the time between the two phases. After completing the exploratory work, I spent time clarifying three issues I felt would become important during the program-based work: understanding the term "woman-positive" in the different contexts of the research, discovering the relationship between learner-centred/community-based work and woman-positive work, and dealing with the always-present question, "What about the men?"

Approaching the concept of "woman-positive"

Going into phase two of this research I understood a "woman-positive" activity as an activity that, in its particular context, arises out of the expressed needs and desires of particular women working in that context. It was an activity that was open to change as its participants went through a process of reflection and analysis, vision and strategizing. This meant the activity was not fixed. It also meant that the activity did not have to meet ALL the needs and desires of ALL the women in the program, although it must meet SOME of the expressed needs and desires of SOME of the women in the program.

It also meant, for me, that during the process of planning, implementing and documenting the activity, the women involved might come to understand which women in the program have benefited from the activity and which women have been marginalized by the activity. I hoped women would better understand where and why they gained support for the activity and where and why they met resistance. I hoped they would be able to envision and strategize around future activities that might more effectively gain support, meet resistance, and benefit more women within their context.

We paid two women from each program to attend three national workshops that focused on research and reflection, discussion and documentation, and interpretation and analysis. We paid them for 1/2 day of research discussion and documentation each week. Frances Ennis from St. John's, NF, worked closely with three programs. I worked with the other nine. We kept in touch through journal writing, telephone calls, and two site visits. During each visit, we taped interviews with each of the two women most closely involved in the work.

The twelve programs in this research represented a wide spectrum of adult literacy practice. There were four community college programs — one on Vancouver Island, one in central British Columbia, one in northern Alberta, and one in the Nortwest Territories. There were two store-front community-based programs — one in New Brunswick and one in southern Ontario. Other programs were located in a Newfoundland public housing community, a Manitoba Native Friendship Centre, the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, a Saskatchwan prison for women, the inner-city streets of Toronto, and a Caribbean-Canadian women's group in a Toronto community-based program.

Clearly, women from these programs were going to have very different understandings of what it means to be woman-positive. As well they should! While I have never believed that there is one "correct" concept of what it means to be woman-positive, I do believe there is an "incorrect" way to approach the concept — one that puts itself forward as universal, as crossing boundaries of race, class, abilities, formal education, immigration status, employment status, sexual orientation, relationship to children, histories of emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual abuse.

I also went into this research with the understanding that, although CCLOW is a feminist organization, I did not expect the programs or the women who represent the programs to identify as feminist. I did have a bottom-line expectation that the program women directly involved in the research would believe that women in literacy programs may benefit from taking part in activities designed specifically for women. They will benefit not because women are somehow deficient, but because the programs and the government policies that structure the programs are somehow deficient.

The contact women would also presumably agree with the conclusion of the first phase — that learner-centred or community-based programs are not necessarily woman-positive — and they would also have agreed to explore how we might change, or at least make apparent, that seeming contradiction.

Learner-centred/woman-positive

I came to make this distinction between learner-centred and woman-positive from my first phase discussion with fifty-seven women and four men. During these discussions, I had a persistent feeling that I was missing something in my understanding. It was as if I was hearing something backwards, as if I was looking at a photographic negative where the white is black and the black is white. It was the feeling that all I could sense was the background even though I was aware that what I wanted was somewhere in the foreground.

I finally isolated two threads of responses to my talk about women's experience. These threads seemed to be entwined with two recurring phrases: "What about the men?" and "But this program is learner-centred/This program is community-based." It was only when I started to put these phrases into context that I was able to begin the process of putting together the different pieces of what was happening. Here is part of that process:

- A woman student in a community-based program told me they used to have a women's group in her program and it was wonderful. This year they have a family literacy group. She's not sure why they changed the group from women to family, but she thinks it must be because the men couldn't come to the women's program and people didn't think that was fair.

- Another woman, a strongly feminist and experienced instructor, told me about a women-only class that was held where she worked several years ago. "[The women-only class] turned into a consciousness-raising group," she said. "A really tight little group of women who gave each other support about all kinds of stuff. And they did a whole lot of literacy work around that. It worked beautifully in terms of them using reading and writing skills to tackle their problems, as well as doing some straight academic work." (Lloyd, 1991a, p. 38)

  Two things happened with this class. First, nobody wanted to work with the men that were left after the women were taken out. The men's group was seen as impossible to teach effectively. They seemed to be unsociable, unmotivated, unruly. It would have taken a great deal of work on materials and group process to get the men together — and the male instructor wasn't willing to take that work on. Second, the instructor teaching the women's group became uncomfortable with her lack of control over the class and the curriculum. She couldn't integrate the women's active participation into her context of "teaching reading and writing."

  So, because nobody wanted to work with the men as they were, because no one wanted to spend time developing effective men's curriculum and process, because the instructor found it difficult to be open to the women's experience, and because there was no time for any of the staff to actually sit down, talk, and analyze the situation — they stopped having a women's class.

- Another woman literacy worker said: "The subtext to these conversations is women want a women-only support group because they need a safe space. Men don't support each other, so a men-only support group is a contradiction. Women support men. So a mixed group is a men's support group." (Lloyd, 1991a, p. 41)

- Another woman instructor, talking about women-only groups, questioned whether women working together, without men, is natural.

I want to acknowledge that the vast majority of the literacy workers, instructors and administrators I spoke with during this research are creative, aware, experienced, reflective practitioners. In fact, they are exceptional in terms of the amount of time they spend interrogating their practice and their theory. I am not trying to show what happens when programs are run poorly, but rather to show the contradictions and tensions that arise in exemplary programs where both the instructors and administration articulate a model of critical literacy and critical pedagogy.

In fact, all the programs I visited in the first phase of the research would identify themselves as learner-centred and community-based. Yet, although commonly used, these are difficult terms to define. Partly this is because "learner-centred" has been co-opted by everyone from government bureaucrats to computer-software companies. But also, it has become the subject of some serious discussion within the literacy and adult basic education community.

In their study of community-based literacy programs, for example, Elaine Gaber-Katz and Gladys Watson (1991) describe learner-centred practice as encompassing "a commitment to active learning, a process whereby learners will be involved in setting their own learning goals and determining their own curriculum." (p. 8) They also identify some contradictions between learner-centredness and the two other characteristics they identify in community-based literacy, literacy from a critical perspective and community-building.

> A point of some tension is whether a self-determined curriculum, which focuses on the individual learner's experience, can also be a "social change" curriculum that will support the empowerment of individuals and the community through collective social action. (p. 27)

My concern with learner-centredness in this research was not so much with curriculum and community change, although these are obviously important areas for discussion. Instead, I focused on the way in which the principles of learner-centred programming makes invisible certain kinds of relationships among students, among workers, and among students and workers. Placing individual students at the centre of the program may help resolve some of the authority issues inherent in one-to-one or small-group teacher-centred programming. However, it does not necessarily confront other contradictions — those that arise out of differences in race, sex, class background, abilities, source of income, immigration status, and so on. (See Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore,1992, for further exploration of these contradictions.)

What I would like to do here is use two excerpts from interviews conducted during phase one of this research to show how we can look at certain patterns of speech and to play with possible interpretations of what is not being said. Obviously, we don't express our thoughts as precisely or coherently when we speak as when we write. I still believe, however, that a close attention to what is left out of our speech can help us discover the contradictions within which we all work.

In the first excerpt, a women literacy worker I'll call Martha is discussing what happens — or doesn't happen — when co-workers discuss gender issues or incidents such as sexist comments, heterosexist jokes, and male/female teasing. Martha says:

> I think some of that has to do with the fact that literacy isn't considered to be — like that isn't the main work of literacy, dealing with that stuff. Although we all know that we do, to some extent. But because it's not clearly acknowledged, it's hard to find the time or the place or the way to go through what you wanted to do or what everybody said they wanted to do. And to actually feel like you're dealing with what you're feeling — And so I think that we probably talk a lot more about issues than we actually act on here. (Lloyd, 1991a, p. 14)

One way of considering this excerpt is to look at the difficulty Martha seems to have actually naming what is going on. There are four instances of what is called, in linguistic terms, "false deixes" — when "it," "this," or "that" have no identifiable reference. A potentially awkward or explosive situation is defused because the listener or reader has to make up an interpretation that makes sense to them.

If Martha used actual words instead of "it" or "that," she might acknowledge that her co-workers are not accepting sexism and heterosexism as priorities for action in the program. She might also leave herself open to accusations that she is breaking solidarity around the political action which they have named as priorities — action that focuses on class, abilities, and, to a lesser extent, racism.

Here, I interpret Martha as illustrating feminist and postmodern critiques of emancipatory literacy and critical pedagogy. Her sentence fragments, contradictions and absences could be seen as mirroring what she feels happening within the program — that the program has a fragmented response to sexist incidents, that there are strong contradictions between the program's theoretical stance around emancipation in general and women's liberation in particular, and the program's practice in respect to women. There is an absence of action in the presence of sexism and heterosexism.

When Martha begins to express these feelings, the feelings themselves remain both partial and distanced.

She says,

"— and to actually feel like you're dealing with what you're feeling."

She might have said,

" — and to actually feel like I'm dealing with what I'm feeling"

and then added,

"then I would really have to push. And if I really pushed then. . . ."

When I take into account other things I have heard and read during this research, I believe that Martha and other women like her don't have enough time and space — sometimes any time and space — to explore their contradictory and fragmented feelings and experiences. This lack of time and space may come from many directions: material constraints in programs, a lack of effective process, passive and aggressive resistance from other workers and from students, and women's uncertainty about whether critical literacy theory includes a critique of sexism and heterosexism that leads to an actual change in practice.

In a second interview, a male literacy worker I'll call Simon makes the connection between practices labelled "learner-centred" and practices I would label "woman-positive." He is discussing a sexual harassment incident in the program.

> And we realized that he was preventing her, and then subsequent women — I mean, we were trying to be learner-centred in giving this guy literacy, but felt that he was a barrier to women in the program. And, see, he was really smart. It was really hard to pin him down between his rights as an individual and his — because we're not detectives and we're not lawyers — his rights as an individual and his freedom. Because we say literacy is a right — his right to have literacy. (Lloyd, 1991a, p. 40)

Simon uses three partial sentences. The first fragment is

> he was preventing her, and then subsequent women —

If we look at one way of finishing this fragment, we can imagine Simon recognizing that the man's behaviour, and the staff's non-intervention, was preventing this woman, and possibly other women, from participating. In order for him to be included, she would have to be excluded.

In the second fragment, Simon does not at first complete this thought:

> It was really hard to pin him down between his rights as an individual and his —

In this case, Simon might move to recognize the man's responsibilities to the individual woman and the program as well as his rights to literacy education. When he does complete the fragment seconds later, however, he doesn't use the words "his responsibilities." He uses the words "his freedom."

The third fragment is:

> because we're not detectives and we're not lawyers

I think this fragment highlights the denial of authority that is so much a theme in emancipatory literacy theory. If there is anything antithetical to critical, learner-centred literacy work, it is probably the image of the worker as someone engaged in Foucauldian surveillance — snooping around and then confronting students with legalisms, judgements and punishment. A very significant goal of critical literacy work is to provide students with a place where they can gain or re-gain the sense of self that various social systems — families, church, school, welfare and justice — have destroyed.

One way of looking at this exercept, then, is to see that what is made visible is the language of rights and freedoms. What remains invisible is the language of responsibility.

Within a learner-centred philosophy, the principle of rights is applied to the students, the principle of responsibility to the worker. In North America, critical adult literacy is a field where most of the workers and volunteers are women, a majority of students — and almost all the accredited theorists — are men. I would like to see this allocation of rights and responsibilities between student and worker — and between worker and theorist — made problematic. In Simon's excerpt, however, the issue of rights and responsibilities makes visible the relationship between students. It is two students who have conflicting interests.

At the beginning of this situation, the rights of the man won over the responsibility to the woman. In the end, as Simon says, the staff decided to "go in favour of the women, saying that because there had been other barriers in people's lives, this was one more barrier. I mean you get in and then you get harassed." (Lloyd, 1991a, p. 41) Unfortunately, by this point, the woman had left the program.

Where does this discussion take us? In the discussion of women and literacy, I believe it takes us back, yet again, to the men.

A male worker asked about the men who don't fit into the way things are moving, toward more woman-positive education.

> They don't agree with the way we are treating women [positively]. What happens to them? Do we just let them drop out? Do they cause trouble in the classroom?. . . . What do we do for them? (Lloyd, 1991a, p. 41)

What do we do for these sexist men. Not with them. He is not talking about letting the men go, or changing them. He is talking about what safe places are we going to create for the men who continue being sexist.

It wasn't only men asking these questions. Many, many of the women I talked with asked "What about the men? We can't ignore the men. The men are going to lose out if we start focussing on women. We can't take it away from the men. That isn't fair!" Finally, I began asking the women, what will the men lose? What can't we take away from the men? What isn't fair? — False deixes again!

It turns out that what we can't take away from the men is the privilege they experience in the programs. As male learners, they have most often been the centre of the programs, the centre of critical literacy theory and practice. In most cases, the work — and the play — of the programs has been defined on the basis of what they suggest, what they will agree to participate in.

The women's needs have been backgrounded — either because the women compromise, the women do not speak, or because staff decide that "women's issues" are a "feminist agenda" and ought not be imposed on the programs simply because a few of the women (usually workers) have that particular hobbyhorse.

They decide that because the program is learner-centred it doesn't have to single out differences in sex — although many programs are beginning to recognize that, in an equivalent situation, singling out differences in race or source of income is acceptable. Thus, in theory, learner-centred programs respond to the needs of the generic, non-gendered student.

This generic, non-gendered student, however, rarely has a women's perspective or a feminist agenda that she is willing or able to articulate in this setting. In an analogous way, most of the women workers are not willing or able to articulate a women's perspective or a feminist agenda because of the conditions of their work.

Before looking at why this might be, I think it is essential that we recognize the very real concern women have of being ignored, censured, or attacked for behaviour that threatens male privilege. We cannot trivialize the decisions women make not to raise women's issues or feminist agendas within program settings that have no practical — as compared to theoretical — commitment to anti-sexist education. Similarly, women who seem unaware of the ways in which they orient themselves to the actions of the men in a program cannot simply be labelled as having "false consciousness" or being "male-identified." Throughout their lives, they have been taught and they have learned very complex survival skills.

At the same time, however, women with privilege, who maintain that privilege by aligning themselves with privileged men, need to take responsibility for their strategic positions.

What about the men?

It is these understandings and distinctions that led me to think further about the question, What about the men? My first response was frustration that, even for an afternoon, we couldn't focus on women's experience as program staff and students. We had to keep coming back to the men. Finally, by paying attention to the context, I realized there were at least two different questions being asked.

The first question was: What are we going to do for men who don't want, or who are unable, to change — who continue to be sexist? How can we guarantee these men a safe place in a program that has decided to include woman-positive activities? This question seemed to want the woman-positive women to supply sexist men with a safe place before they proceed with activities that are designed for women.

The second question was: What are we going to do for the women who are in contact with the men who don't want or are unable to change? How can we guarantee these women a safe place in a program that has decided to include woman-positive activities? This question seemed to want the woman-positive women to ensure other women have support and protection before they proceed with activities that are designed for women.

I needed to put these questions into context before I could work with them in a pragmatic, rather than simply reactive, manner. They are questions that we needed to consider seriously, both as we began phase two and as we reflected on and documented what happened in each location. For example, we needed to ask: Is it our responsibility to work with the men or to try to interest men in taking some responsibility for working with other men?

We seem to have little ambivalence in terms of our reponsibility to continue working with the women in a way that provides them with necessary support. Yet, if we do take on the responsibility of working with the men, that will leave us very little time, energy, or resources to continue our work with women. And I can already hear the response for more resources to work with women being countered with the claim that, since we are working with the men, that is helping the women and so there will be no more allocated to the women.

Why would we, why do we, have that fight — the fight to do something positive for women without having to do something for the men first? Why, when we want to do something positive for women, are we told that we can't because the program is learner-centred, not woman-centred; community-based, not woman-based. We seemingly can't do something woman-positive because then we would no longer be working with "learners" or with the "community." We would be working with "women." As I continued my discussions, I began to recognize two suspicions lurking behind these responses.

First, women who want to work with women are practically suspect. They are assumed to be feminist and, therefore, are assumed to have an agenda that will not only be biased in favour of women but against men and against community. Their practice will supposedly discriminate and bring about division within the program and within the community. (As if that division does not already exist.)

Second, women who want to work with women are theoretically suspect. Feminist theory is not congruent with critical theory — it breaks solidarity along sex lines and supposedly reinforces difference rather than commonality. Since emancipatory literacy theory has been built on an empowerment model that does not distinguish between student and student, community member and community member, making these distinctions based on sex is assumed to be disempowering. (As if not making distinctions based on sex is not disempowering.)

In response to these assumptions and suppositions, I believe we need to continue questioning the assumption that community members and students are generic people. Just as generic "man" does not include the gendered woman, generic "student" and generic "community member" does not include the gendered student or community member. Thus, programs that respond to the needs of "students" or the needs of "communities," the needs of "families" or the needs of "the workplace," may not be meeting the needs of the gendered woman.

Our experience in this research convinces me that unless practitioners are able to allocate time and resources to a reflective investigation of commonsense practice in their programs, they will not be able to make visible the distinctions that already exist between the various male and female experiences of being staff or student.

Similarly, members of communities and students are differently located in terms of race, ability, immigration status, relation to children, employment status, sexuality, source of income, and so on. To erase difference on any level is surely to restrict our ability to meet the needs of students, community members, family members, and workers who live the experience of these locations in all facets of their lives, including in literacy programs.

Yet arguments that demonstrate the tensions and contradictions women face in programs continue to be met by passive resistance and active negation — both of which have been experienced by some women students and staff as aggression. This aggression can be perceived as a form of violence, as a method of marginalization, of reinforcing women's powerlessness, of refusing recognition of women's cultural difference, and of continued exploitation of women workers. They make up what Iris Marion Young (1990) calls the five faces of oppression.

A significant number of the women who participated in this research raised serious concerns about the repercussions of implementing new activities specifically for women. They expressed particular interest in the personal and program support that comes from having their activities "researched" as part of a national project. Simply by participating in this research they gained some measure of protection against the seemingly innocuous question: What about the men?

Other programs were interested in participating because they have experienced difficulty involving women literacy workers and students in "women's issues." They thought some of this difficulty might stem from concern over possible responses from others involved in the program or from members of the community. They believed that by being part of a national research project they gained a legitimacy that provided advance protection.

Still others — and this has proven to be a complex consequence of the research for me — did not anticipate difficulty in engaging in and documenting woman-positive activities. To some extent, this was because they chose activities that were congruent with the program philosophy and that they thought would not challenge that philosophy. Their experience of unanticipated resistance resulted, in almost all instances, in significant personal, professional, political, and structural change.

I could not possibly anticipate, at the beginning of this phase of the research, the incredible range of answers we discovered when we asked, "What happens when some women in an adult literacy program decide to do something they consider woman-positive?" The material in this book, and in The power of woman-positive literacy work, is testimony to women's ability to both affirm and challenge their own reality and the reality of others they work, play, and do research with. I have tremendous respect for their open and respectful response to these challenges, and give thanks for the strength and generosity of their affirmations.

References

Gaber-Katz, Elaine & Watson, Gladys M. (1991). The land that we dream of . . . A participatory study of community-based literacy. Toronto: OISE Press.

Lloyd, Betty-Ann. (1991a). Discovering the strength of our voices: Women and literacy programs. Toronto: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women.

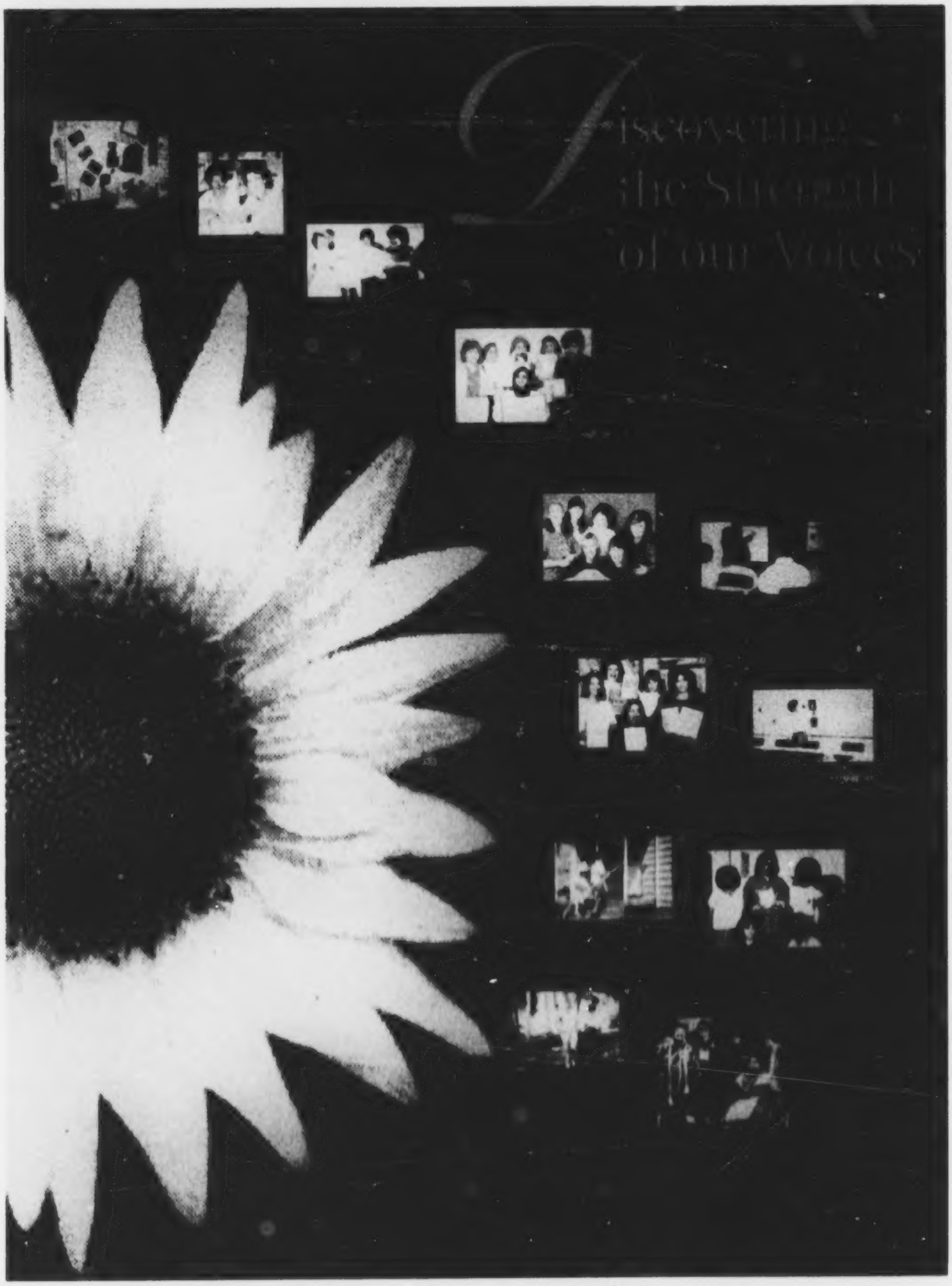
——. (1991b, May). Learner-centred does not necessarily mean woman-positive: The experience in literacy programs. Paper delivered at the annual meeting of Canadian Women's Studies. Kingston, Ontario.

Lloyd, Betty-Ann with Ennis, Frances & Atkinson, Tannis. (1994). The power of woman-positive literacy work — Program-based action research. Toronto: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women.

Luke, Carmen & Gore, Jennifer. (Eds.). (1992). Feminisms and critical pedagogy. New York: Routledge.

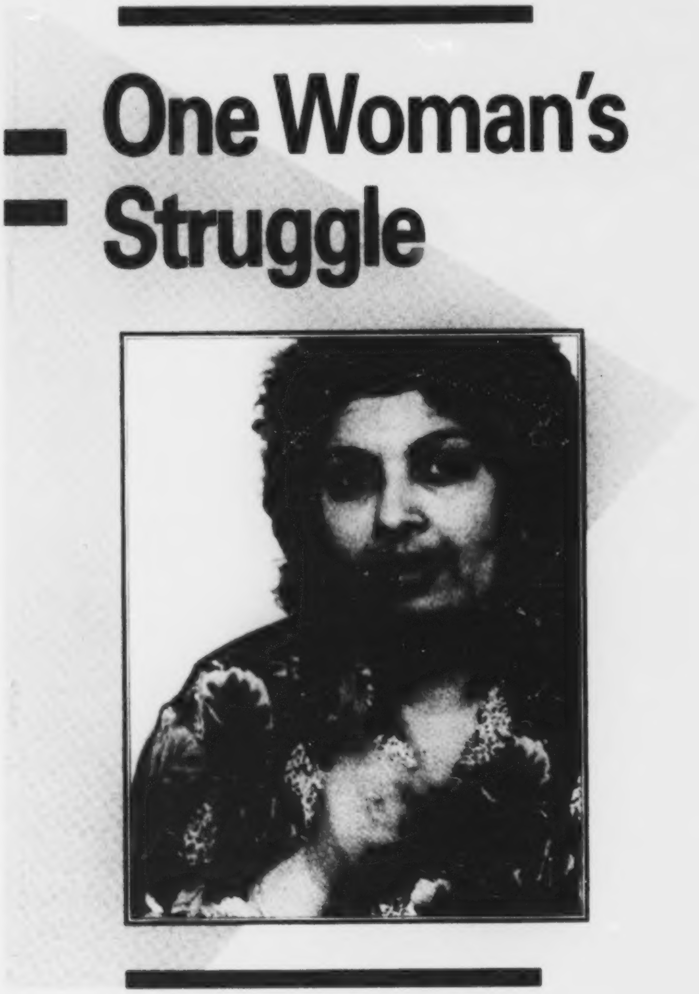
Young, Iris Marion. (1990). Justice and the politics of difference. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sang-Mi Jeon of Blackbird Designs, Toronto, worked with Tannis Atkinson to develop the project's poster, based on discussions during the second workshop.


Discovering the Strength of our Voices

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Toronto ALFA Centre published One Woman's Struggle, a story written by the members of the women's group.



One Woman's Struggle

The following pages contain the information from four pamphlets produced by the Toronto ALFA Centre.

We formed a woman's group at ALFA

ALFA Toronto
Adult Literacy For Action
Centre

1900 Davenport Road, Toronto, Ontario, M6N 1B7 Phone 652-3652

Booklet #1:
Why do women need a women's group?

The Toronto ALFA Centre is a program that helps adults learn to read and to write. There are about 60 students who work one-to-one with volunteer tutors.

ALFA also has group tutoring sessions for men and women. Eighteen people come to these sessions, but only five of them are women. Since half of the students at ALFA are women, we wanted to find out why more women were not coming to the group sessions.

We asked the women and this is what they said:

- "Some of the men talk too much and we don't get a chance to say things during the group sessions. This makes us feel that our views are worthless."
- "We are not comfortable with the loudness of the men. They often get into endless arguments, so we don't come back."
- "We complained that one of the men in the group sexually harassed some of the women. When we asked him, he said he did not do it. Some of us don't feel safe around the Centre, we are afraid we might be assaulted."
- "Some of our husbands don't want us to be around other men. If we go to a group where there are men, we are afraid of what our husbands might do if they find out."

ALFA used to have a women-only group, but it had to stop because there was not enough staff to run it. However, we felt that this was not fair and it was important to provide a space for the women to do group work. So we decided to start a women's group again.

We called the women who came to the previous women's group. We sent a flyer to all women in the program inviting them to join the group. The women were delighted to hear we were starting a women's group. Six women joined and we meet every Tuesday afternoon. Some said they would like to come but they work during the day.

The women wrote about the group and this is what they said:

> "I think that the ALFA women group is done me a lot of good since I am come for about a month now. It is help me lot. It help to meet other people. I enjoy the women group."
> by Elaine
>
> "I think the group is very interested. I liked the group. I enjoy coming to the women's group to eat and to talk and to listen to Davie (a member of the group)."
> by Moisley
>
> "I started the group and it is great and I enjoy it. I look forward to come to it. The lady group is good and it is very friendly and I hope it continue. I find myself improvement. I wish there is more day."
> by Doreen
>
> "I think the women group was very good. I hope to continue because I like to come to read and write. Also the teacher is very nice so that she bring food and she kind."
> by Davie

Booklet #2:
What happens in our women's group?

The women's group is very important to us because we are learning to read and write. But the women's group means a lot more to us than just learning to read and write. It is a place where we feel comfortable to talk about our experiences. A place where we can support each other, learn about other things, and have fun together.

These are some of the things we do:

- We read stories of women in literacy: Women who learned reading and writing skills. Women who experienced difficulties in life, who have been abused by their families or husbands. Women who have overcome their difficulties and are independent and happy.
- We share our own stories about: what happened to us when we were growing up; the experiences we had in school; how we came to Canada; what it was like when we first came here; what our job is like; how we came to the program and what we have learned.
- We write our stories and we read them to each other. This helps us learn how to write sentences and how to spell words. And it helps us learn to read.
- We discuss issues that affect us day to day: issues such as racism, sexual harassment, parenting, family responsibilities and unemployment.
- We share concerns and talk about what to do in different situations. For example, what to do when your 18-year old daughter refuses to talk to you? When your daughter-in-law eats your cooking and complains about the smell of your food? When your children grow older and you know they are about to leave home? When your daughter is called a "slow learner" in school and you don't agree? When your sons follow your abusive husband and call you "stupid"?
- We visit other literacy programs and centres to learn about these groups. We watch videos together, and we invite guests to come and talk to us about different issues — stress, AIDS, immigration, parenting, tenants' rights, the school system and citizens' rights.
- We do different activities together. Sometimes we cook together. Each of us takes turns in bringing recipes for a main dish. We all bring the ingredients and we cook the meal together. At the end of the cooking we eat the meal and write the recipe.

Booklet #3:
What do people say about the women's group?

Some events that led up to forming the women's group

- In the summer the group had a discussion about the law in Canada. Many men expressed the view that the law here was on the woman's side. They felt it interfered too much in people's relationships. The men made comments like, "Here a man could go to jail for beating his wife, even if she deserves it," and "A man cannot even cuff his wife."

- The staff were hearing from women who were afraid or unable to come to the program because of violent partners. Sometimes tutors were turned away from homes by the students' husbands. And sometimes the woman would be peeking out behind the curtains as her tutor walked away.

- Staff, tutors and students were being harassed by male students and were feeling uncomfortable. One woman said, "If this guy continues, I'm gonna stop come."

- A male staff member was uncertain about whether the staff had the right to confront a student who was being accused of harassment. He felt the staff's job was only to help people learn to read and write. He didn't think the program should address incidents of harassment.

- A women's group was formed in February 1991 but had to stop in April of the same year because the staff did not have time to do it.

This is what happened at a group session on January 29, 1992.

A staff member told the students about ALFA's decision to form a women's group. This decision was made because the staff was hearing from more women that sexual harassment was happening at ALFA and that women were not always comfortable working in the other groups.

This led to a very heated discussion about sexual harassment. Most men in the group were upset. They were concerned that something they thought to be "innocent" would be used by a woman who wanted "to get back at them". She might say that she was being harassed.

The men said that if something bothers a woman, she should say so at the time. The women said that it is sometimes difficult for women to speak up because they are afraid.

One man said, "Some women really don't mean no when they say no." All the women in the group and one of the men disagreed with this statement. The rest of the men agreed with it.

One of the men suggested that a men's group should be formed. No one supported his idea that night. Although he did talk about forming a men's group several times in the following months, it did not happen.

The following is what some of the men wrote about the women's group.

The women like privacy.
Some women feel comfortable without men.
Sexual harassment and thing like that.
by George

Women and men
We work together at ALFA
So I do not understand about
the womens' group.
by Bertram

Women them slaves
Men we slaves too.
by Louis

Wherever you go in the world
It have all kind of group
in all country you go.
In Canada have plenty
women organizations.
by John

Some events since forming the women's group and the January 1992 discussion:

- There was a long discussion at one of our Board meetings about women coming to the ALFA group at night. The Board members talked about safety and self-defence courses.

- Sexual harassment was highlighted as an issue for ALFA at the Program Planning meeting in February 1992. One male student said, "All men are in suspicion unless we name who the harassers are." Others wanted to know, "What is harassment?" A Sexual Harassment Committee was set up. It consisted of three male students and one female staff member. The Committee met, did some research and developed a statement and draft policy for ALFA.

- There was a series of three theme discussions about "What comes between people?" "Problems with the system," and "Who should have rights?" These are some of the things that came up in the discussion. In reference to the media's focus on an Anglican Church priest who was challenging the church about gays' rights to become priests, one man began with "All gay people should be sent to the oven." One of the discussions took place during Mike Tyson's trial. A number of the men thought that Tyson had been set up. They did not believe the woman and felt it was her fault for going to his room.

- ALFA formed an Anti-Racism Committee which has a student, a tutor, and a staff member on it. This committee met and produced a draft statement and policy and a project proposal.

Booklet #4:
What is sexual harassment?

At a sexual harassment committee meeting we talked about what sexual harassment is and is not, and decided to do a poster to put up on the wall at ALFA. The following is what we put on the poster:

What is Sexual Harassment?

**If someone does these things to you,
they are sexually harassing you.**

- touches you when you don't want to be touched by them
- looks at you in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable
- asks you out and keeps pushing after you've said "no"
- talks sexual things to you and continues to talk that way after you have told them to stop
- forces you to give them your phone number
- comes around after you've said "I'm not interested"
- draws attention to pictures that make you feel embarrassed
- tries to bargain with you for sex

Sexual Harassment is not

- friends hugging or touching
- flirting between friends

Respect is important. Sharing is important. Sexual harassment is when there is no respect and the action is not shared.

We also talked about how we would let people know what to do if they were harassed. We decided to make up a piece of paper to give to all students. We decided on the following words for that:

> We at ALFA
> do not tolerate sexual harassment.
>
> If you get harassment by anyone
> contact a staff or board person right away.
> Do not be afraid
> come forward,
> we will stand behind you.
>
> If you harass someone at ALFA
> you will be called into a meeting
> with board and staff members.
> You will be expelled from ALFA.
> We will use our Sexual Harassment Policy
> to back us up.
> You will not have a second chance.

Gail Lanoie and Diane Eastman (standing, l-r) talk about their participation in the research with Rita Cullen, president of the Brandon Friendship Centre board of directors, and Harold Weitman, chair of the literacy working group.

Gender, culture, and personal experiences that get in the way of learning: The need for core funding for adult literacy projects

Diane Eastman
Brandon Friendship Centre, Brandon, MB

A policy paper presented to the Literacy Office, Department of Education, Government of Manitoba and Board Members, Brandon Friendship Centre

Over the last twelve months, I have had the opportunity to focus on my academic upgrading work at the Brandon Friendship Centre from three very different perspectives.

> I have participated in a two-year national action research project sponsored by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat. With women from eleven other adult literacy and basic education programs across the country, I developed and implemented a woman-positive activity in my program. I facilitated a group of women students who rewrote, in clear language, a brochure outlining services for adults who had been sexually molested as children. As part of that research, I have been provided with resources to discuss and reflect on what happened with the women involved, with the other students, with the program, and with myself as a practitioner.
>
> I participated in four week-long advanced training sessions for adult literacy practitioners organized by the Manitoba Literacy Office. During the time of this training, I facilitated a writing group of men and women students in order to examine what happened when I used formal, rather than experiential, approaches to student writing. My work in this course was strongly influenced by metacognitive — or meaning-making — approaches to learning and by the problem-posing teaching and learning philosophies of Paulo Freire.
>
> I participated in a three-day workshop on Native Literacy Education sponsored by Okanogan College. During this workshop and through the writing assignment I completed later, I focused on the way in which academic programs can benefit from the introduction of cultural and life skills elements based on the individual and group needs of the students. These elements can become an integral part of academic programing through the use of theme units, but they cannot be pre-programed through standardized curriculum or skills-based approaches.

Brandon
Friendship
Centre
303 - 9th St
Brandon, MB
R7A 4A8

All three of these experiences highlighted for me the way in which students can make significant academic and personal progress by working in groups that are formed for reasons other than standardized curriculum segments or skills-based program mandates.

Based on these experiences, I am making a strong recommendation that adult literacy and academic upgrading programs receive core funding that can be used to develop specific projects that focus on students both as individuals and as members of groups defined by gender, culture and personal experiences, in order to deal with issues that get in the way of learning.

I want to use my experience in the CCLOW project to develop my argument that projects developed by and for particular students to address their particular concerns are the best way to facilitate both their academic and their personal development.

For a very long time I have been concerned by the fact that so many of the women who attend the upgrading program at the Friendship Centre have been abused. The abuse does not seem to centre on any particular type at any particular age. Most of them have suffered from some form of abuse since childhood and often are continuing to be involved in abusive relationships.

I have not felt qualified to deal with situations when women asked to speak with me for a moment. Many of these women had tried to access counselling and for a variety of reasons the counselling did not work out. It was clear that coming to me was something of a last resort. Since part of my job as a literacy instructor is to listen when students need to talk, I would sit down with them. What I heard was often frightening. It took me a long while to be able to listen and not react only on an emotional level to what I was hearing. As time passed I got better at it and more and more of the women in the program began to tell me their stories.

I still did not know how to help the women deal with the situation, however, and I always encouraged them to find others in the community who were more qualified to listen and help. Once I had assisted them with finding help I could back away and let the professionals take over. Unfortunately, the women didn't want me to back away altogether. They still found that they needed me to help with writing assigned by their counsellors, with reading information, and with listening while they told their stories.

When I had the opportunity to apply to CCLOW for involvement in their national research project, I very much looked forward to the opportunity of meeting other women who I knew must have had the same experiences. I felt that in order to help the women in my program I needed to have as much general knowledge as I could get. I had to be able to discuss alternatives and healing with them. I also had to learn to hear their stories and not react so emotionally. I looked to the CCLOW project to set me on the path. I needed something to help me focus on what I needed to do and the CCLOW project was the answer.

After the first of three national workshops in which all of the women involved in the research met, I discussed with my co-researcher and executive director of the Friendship Centre, Gail Lanoie, how I had prepared for the group. My first step was to call the women together so we might discuss possible processes and content for our work. I wanted them to decide what they wanted to focus on and how they wanted to go about it.

Because I believed that the issue of abuse would be high on their list, I spent some time trying to find out where women could access counselling and other forms of help, such as short and longer term housing. I discovered that there is such a shortage of space that even when a woman is ready for help, she may have to wait for extended periods of time before she can access it.

The group made some initial decisions before we began our discussions. For example, what was said in the group stayed there; we would be supportive of each other, not critical; when someone needed to talk we would all listen without interruption; if someone became too emotional to continue we would break and continue the group at another time. The group also decided to meet once a week for a couple of hours.

The women brainstormed almost fifty possible topics. The one they chose to focus on first was physical, emotional, and sexual abuse — with a strong emphasis on sexual abuse. I asked them what they wanted to do since there were many ways we could go about discussing and learning about the topic. It happened that one of the women had made an effort to join a group that dealt with adults who had been molested as children. She could not, however, read the information given to her. When she explained her situation to the rest of the group, they decided to rewrite the information so more people would be able to read it.

We brought in a facilitator to talk to the group about clear language and plain publishing. The group then took the brochure and, through trial and error, we rewrote it. In this process of rewriting, the women not only looked at the information from an academic perspective, but also from a personal perspective. I have attached an appendix to this report that outlines the ways in which the rewriting became an academic curriculum.

On a personal level, the women discovered that many of them shared the same feelings. Or they discovered that one of them used to feel the same way, but for a variety of reasons had been able to overcome the feeling. The women offered each other guidance and counselling from a perspective that few counsellors can have. Not only does each of the women know what it is to have suffered so terribly, but each was still in the process of struggling to come to terms with it. They were truly peers. The women shared how they felt, how they still feel, and what has helped them to deal with the feelings.

After the first few weeks of group meetings, it became clear to me that every woman in the group was experiencing significant academic and personal growth. They all looked forward to "CCLOW" as the group was called. In response to their enthusiasm, we extended the group meetings to twice a week and then to every morning. During this time, CCLOW re-imbursed the program for one-half day each week during which I talked about, reflected on, and wrote about what was happening in this woman-positive activity. The coordinating researcher, Betty-Ann Lloyd, came to visit the program twice and I attended three national workshops where I met with women from the other eleven programs involved.

I came to realize that presenting the profile of one composite woman from the group I might help others understand the kinds of experience and change that was happening.

A composite profile

Sally grew up in a mid-sized town on the prairies. Her parents were white, working class people. Neither her father nor her mother finished high school, but both are literate.

From the small child's perspective, life is wonderful. She has all she needs — food, clothing, and a warm bed. She gets shown affection, now and then. She has friends to play with. She only gets a spanking if she has been a "bad girl."

When she is six years old, Sally looks forward to going to school. School will be wonderful because she can read books and play with lots of other children. She is a happy, warm, outgoing child who has lots of friends. Her teachers always give positive reports as she does relatively well in school.

When Sally reaches 9 or 10 years old, she begins to feel a little neglected by her parents. They don't cuddle and love her the way they used to. She is a big girl now. She has to begin to help around the house and her parents are beginning to depend on her to help with the household chores. There are a number of other siblings in the home and mother and father are busy trying to "put food on the table and keep a roof over our heads."

At this time an older male relative, Uncle, begins to show Sally the attention she needs. It starts with wrestling, tickling, and playing games together. Over time, Uncle changes the games. He begins by touching her in her private places.

At first she feels very uncomfortable, but Uncle tells her how much he loves her and what a good girl she is. She doesn't like it, but can't do anything about it. Eventually, Uncle has sexual intercourse with her. Uncle tells her that it is their secret and mother and father will punish her if she says anything. He doesn't want to see her get punished, so he will keep the secret and she must too. Sally is just 11 years old.

After many abusive encounters, Sally is no longer the same little girl. She is no longer happy and outgoing. She becomes withdrawn and a little sullen. She doesn't enjoy school so much any more and has trouble concentrating on her work. She is beginning to get in trouble with the

> teacher because she doesn't always have her homework done and what is done is not good enough. She doesn't enjoy playing with her friends any more, either. She prefers to sit on a swing and just be by herself. Her friends are different now. They tease her and say mean things to her. She doesn't know what the matter is; she is just confused about everything.
>
> Sally's parents get after her because she has, on occasion, wet her bed. Not only is she doing poorly in school, but now she has wet the bed. She is told she should be ashamed of herself. She is a bad girl. Her parents take her to the doctor to find out why she is wetting the bed, but the doctor can find no medical reason. Her parents ask her what is wrong.
>
> Sally finally finds the words to tell them what Uncle has done. She is told that she really is a bad girl for saying such awful things. Just as Uncle said she would be, she is punished. She is also told to never speak like that again.
>
> A pattern develops in Sally's life as she gets older. There are few periods in her life when someone is not abusing her. Finally, at a very young age, she becomes pregnant. She moves in with the child's father, but they soon separate. Since then, she has had many relationships in her life. None of them were really any good. She feels that all men are the same. They are all rotten.
>
> Sally is now in her 30s and has children. She lives on welfare because she has no education and can't get a job that will support her and her family. Her children sometimes are too much for her and she doesn't know how she will cope. She has asked Child and Family Services for help, but she feels all they want to do is tell her how she should act and what she should do. She doesn't feel they have helped her cope with the children.
>
> She finally decides that if she can only get an education, she would be okay. She goes into the community to find some place where she can go to school.

Sally's experience before she comes to academic upgrading is a composite experience. It could be all of the women in the group. What happens to the women as they progress through the group, however, is unique. Each woman experiences personal and academic progress. I want to outline some of this progress, using pseudonyms and changing some of the details so the women's confidentiality is assured.

A profile: Theresa

Theresa was only able to say that she had been abused. She couldn't or wouldn't say any more. After hearing the other women tell parts of their stories and talking about the issue of abuse from a non-personal perspective, however, she was able to tell me her story for the very first time.

Theresa said that she didn't know where to start so I suggested that she treat this as a writing assignment. We followed the steps that we use in the classroom for anything that needs to be written. The only difference was that she spoke and I scribed for her. Two days later, when it was completed, she held the finished piece in her hand. She told me that she had never been able to think about it before without the feelings overwhelming her. She had never really admitted the abuse to anyone because she couldn't put it into words. She was able to write about her feelings, talk about what had happened, and ask questions.

While Theresa was able to tell her story for the first time, she also learned much about writing and the process of writing. From a purely academic perspective, it was probably the most useful writing assignment she has ever done. We needed to discuss every aspect of writing from punctuation to readability. The writing that she did in her class assignments improved as a result of this in-depth story that meant so much to her.

A profile: Heather

Heather had a great deal of difficulty dealing with any problem that arose in her life. Her response to any situation that made her feel uncomfortable was violent outbursts and complete withdrawal or extremely child-like behaviour. She regularly responded inappropriately in the classroom. For example, if I asked a learner to come to my office she would yell out statements such as, "Uh, oh, somebody's in trouble," or "You're gunna get it now. You must have done somethin'. You're gunna get it." Even when I spoke to her about saying things that were out of place, she couldn't seem to stop. She would respond with tears and threats to quit the program. This would be followed by a few days of absence and then I would receive a phone call asking if she could come back to class. No matter what I tried I couldn't seem to alter her behaviour.

Involvement in the CCLOW project has accomplished what I could not. The change came about abruptly. She had always denied that she had been abused, but working with other women who openly admitted it allowed her to admit it also.

On one occasion I had to ask her to come to the office so we could have a chat. There were no inappropriate outbursts, no tears, or threats to quit. Instead she admitted that she needed to change and that if I helped her she felt that a change could come about. On many occasions I have noticed a tremendous growth in Heather. She is much more an adult in many ways. She can take criticism, she acknowledges her faults and weaknesses, she rarely responds inappropriately, and she never threatens to quit school.

A profile: Jan

Jan has always blamed herself for all that has happened to her. She desperately wants to be a member of a family and her own family, especially her mother, has turned away from her. She found this impossible to accept. It had to be a result of something that she had done. When we discussed anything that centred around the family there was a good chance that she would burst into tears. Christmas time was extremely hard for her. She hated it and would become resentful when the rest of the class wanted to celebrate together. She usually enjoyed herself when she participated, but then would become very sad because she couldn't share the same experience with her family.

Jan has begun to accept the fact that not all that has happened to her is a direct result of her actions. Her relationship with her mother has improved over the past four months. She has stopped trying to figure out what her mother wants of her. Instead, she told her mother that she would like to have a mother-daughter relationship. She was prepared to deal with a final rejection and get on with her life. Happily, the two of them have spent time together and are getting to know each other.

As Jan was beginning to deal with the abuse she experienced in the past and her relationship with her family, she also began to more effectively deal with educational difficulties. Jan was a reluctant learner. I had to spend a lot of time encouraging her to try new material. She spent more time dabbling with the material than actually working with it. She is now moving through new material at a pace that is consistent with the rest of the class. She has even expressed a desire to read about topics because she has limited knowledge of the areas.

A profile: Dean

A moment of truth arrived for Dean when she realized that many other women who have been abused feel the same way she does. She said she always felt that she was somehow different. She had always been told that time would make the hurt go away, but it didn't. Now she knows that time must be accompanied by actively dealing with the abuse. This has made her feel much more comfortable about herself and her feelings. She was very relieved to learn that the other women still had nightmares, still cried, or still had difficulty talking about the abuse. Her feelings of isolation were immense.

Dean always was very good academically. It was one of the few things about which she felt good. When she could work on her own, she would move through the material at a fairly rapid pace. She did have difficulty working in groups and being involved with the CCLOW project has enabled her to feel more comfortable in a group setting. She began to participate on a limited basis in group activities in the classroom.

All of the women felt really good about rewriting the Adults Molested as Children (AMAC) brochure. They see this brochure as the first step in getting women to seek counselling. The women felt if the brochure is easy to read and lets a woman know what AMAC can do to help, more women would have access to counselling.

Having the Community Developer from the Literacy Office give the women a workshop on plain language and holding the workshop in the boardroom of the Friendship Centre added to this feeling of importance. They were being treated just the same as the people who they see as important. Being able to do something that is seen as important by others in the community was a tremendous boost to their self-concept as women. It offered them a chance at doing something that could make a difference in someone else's life.

Now that this particular activity has ended, Jan continues to work on her relationship with her mother. Theresa has decided she has academic ability and she is now attending a high school program. Heather is continuing with the upgrading class and progressing at a much more rapid rate than she has in the past. Dean applied for and got a job in the northern part of the province. She knows she can do the job and do it well.

Recommendations:

During the course of the research, it became abundantly clear that many of the women involved in the program have many difficulties with which they have to deal.

As we discussed how the abuses they had suffered affected their lives, all of the women said it was the contributing factor in their dropping out of school. They all stated how hard they found it to concentrate in school after the abuse started in their lives. They further stated that it continued to affect them to this day. Some of the women who had not had any help dealing with the abuse found that many times they felt overwhelmed, frustrated, angry, hurt, alone, stupid, or useless. They were mystified by these feelings because none of them understood that the feelings were normal, stemming from childhood abuse.

Those women who had sought counselling said that they often had to take time out from their school work because, in the course of dealing with the abuse in a counselling situation, many old memories arose. For example, a counsellor called me to say that a student in my class would not be coming in that day. This student was not ready to deal with math and reading when she had just spent two hours reliving being six years old and sexually abused.

Thus it became clear that programs must take a holistic approach to the education of adult literacy students. Each individual in the program has a set of life circumstances different from everyone else. This must be taken into consideration when expectations and planning are being discussed. I do not think that we should expect the women and men who come to our programs to always be at peak learning potential. We must have compassion and understanding and help them work through all of the problems they face, not just the academic problem. To this end, our programs must be flexible and allow students the time that is necessary for each one to deal with any and all problems.

We must also understand that times will arise when academic work must take second place to personal issues. If a student suddenly is showing a lack of interest in school work, it does not necessarily mean she no longer cares about school. It could be that a personal issue is pushing to the forefront. The student must be allowed the time away from academic work to confront these issues.

Many adults who are involved in basic upgrading also need help in accessing counselling. To have instructor/counsellors working in programs is the ideal. A level of trust is often built between the student and the instructor that allows a student to talk to the instructor about past or present abuse. The instructor may be the first person that a student has had enough trust in to tell her story to. Instructors need to be allowed time within the program to help the student face the challenge of dealing with personal problems. Once the student feels comfortable, the instructor can help the student access counselling away from the program. The program would be the first step in dealing with the problem.

In terms of planning curriculum and content, the student must be consulted as to needs and how best to meet them. If a student wants to learn about parenting, health, nutrition, budgeting, or any other non-traditional academic area, we must try to provide the information. Time to provide the class with the non-traditional information, the dollars to purchase special interest material, and the professional development of the instructor to turn any topic into curriculum are necessary to meet the needs of students.

A variety of programs are needed in communities. Programs are needed in institutions, such as community colleges and correctional centres, and in the community. The needs are as varied as the people who gain access, and programing in only one setting is not going to meet the needs of every adult.

Finally, to meet the needs of adults, both women and men, who come to upgrading, funding must be stabilized and increased. Few programs in our province have stable funding. Each year they have to apply for the few dollars that are available and each year the request for more programs grows. Special interest groups, such as literacy for the mentally challenged or literacy for seniors, are also seeking the same dollars. More and more people are coming to the programs requesting help with literacy needs. Yet no new commitment to funding for literacy has come about.

Summary

In summary, a holistic approach to literacy programing is essential if we want to meet the needs of all individuals. Programs must be flexible with time and curriculum. Students must be consulted when curriculum is being planned, and teachers must be trained in curriculum planning. Teachers must also be given counselling training in order to assist those students who need them as the first step to long term counselling. A variety of programs are needed within a community to meet the varied needs of individuals. Dollars must be stabilized and increased to adequately meet the growing demand from the public for basic education upgrading.

Appendix I: An outline of the way in which I developed curriculum for our woman-positive activity

I first introduced the idea of a women's group to the whole class by telling them that our program had been accepted as a potential group for the CCLOW project. I explained what CCLOW was all about. The women responded very positively. They thought it would be wonderful to have a group of just women. They didn't know exactly what we would be doing, just having a group of only women was enough to capture their attention. The men didn't pay too much attention to it. This was something for the women and they never said anything.

Current practice in adult education emphasizes finding out where the student's interests lie and developing lessons from this interest base. Following that practice, the women chose a topic from a list they had brainstormed. The group decided they wanted to talk about abuse, although they didn't have any specific ideas of exactly how to do this. Then one of the women brought in a brochure from a local Adults Molested as Children (AMAC) chapter. She had made an attempt to access their services, but didn't pursue it because she couldn't read their brochure. We decided to rewrite it.

Had the group asked for experts to come into the class to talk to them, our CCLOW project would have consisted of meetings once a week for an hour or two. However, they chose to do something that can readily be turned into curriculum. I saw this as an excellent opportunity for the women to do some group writing on a topic that they had chosen.

The first thing that I did was talk to them about plain language. We discussed what made the brochure difficult to read and then talked about ways to make it easier. I then suggested it might be a good idea if we had someone come to the group and give us a workshop on writing in plain language.

I chose to have the Literacy Office give the workshop because I felt that if I talked to them about the process, it would be the teacher giving more lessons on writing. In this instance, I did not want them to expect me to provide answers for them. I wanted them to see themselves as being as knowledgeable about the topic as I am. By participating in the workshop as an equal, I hoped the group would see me more as a member than as the leader. Also, since the practitioners in the area receive many workshops from the Literacy Office and the students have always seen this as something professional people do, I hoped that the workshop would give them the feeling that they were important people with something important to do.

The workshop leader started by having the group brainstorm what they thought plain language is. The following is an example of what the women thought plain language might be.

1. You can understand it.
2. Shorter words instead of long ones.
3. Complete sentences.
4. Shorter sentences.

5. Common words.

Using the following material from Teaching patients with low literacy skills (Doak, Doak, & Root, 1985) we discussed eight principles of plain language.

1. Write in a conversational tone.
2. Use short words and short sentences.
3. Reduce concept density.
4. Use advance organizers.
5. Be consistent with words.
6. Put first things first.
7. Use feedback to test for learning.
8. Summarize and review.

During the course of the workshop, the women rewrote these principles:

1. Write it the way you would say it. Use the word "you."
2. Use short words and short sentences.
3. Take out any ideas that are not needed. Have only one idea in each paragraph. Have only one idea in each sentence.
4. Use titles and pictures, etc. Make sure the pictures give the right idea.
5. Use the same word all the time to mean the same thing.
6. Put the ideas in order. Put the main idea first.
7. Ask questions to see if the readers understand.
8. At the end, use a few words to retell the main ideas.

These points were first discussed in the workshop. We then went back to the classroom and held further discussions. Anything that was unclear to any of the women was gone over in more detail until everyone had a clear understanding.

How do you make this curriculum? I recognized that each step contains elements of writing that must be taught if students are to become accomplished writers.

Point one. Write it the way you would say it.

This point brings up the issue of different language for different purposes. We discussed how we talk to each other, the words we use when we talk to each other, and how we alter the speech pattern when speaking to different people. For example, we do not talk to a doctor in the same way that we talk to our friends. We use different words even when we are talking about the same thing to each of them.

In the same way, we have more than one writing style. We would make sure everything is absolutely correct on a letter to a potential employer. However, we would not care if a few commas were missing in a letter to a friend. In the first case, a business letter is being written and an impression is being made. In the second case, you are writing a letter to someone who knows you and is not going to be making decisions about you based on missing commas.

The brochure is being used by AMAC as an introduction of themselves to people who might wish to access their services. It should be inviting and warm. It should give information, but not overwhelm the reader. It should be personal. The words that the women chose to rewrite the brochure reflect this.

While dealing with this step we covered vocabulary, dictionary skills (to establish word meaning), context, use of the thesaurus (synonyms), and spelling. We also talked about why a conversational tone and the use of the word "you" would make the brochure more personal and inviting to a potential client.

Point two. Use short words and sentences.

This item led us into discussions about what constitutes a short word and a short sentence. The group decided that a short word should contain no more than two syllables. They agreed that there were some three syllable words that would not present a problem to a beginning reader, but words with one or two syllables should be used whenever possible. This decision was reached only after the group found out about syllables and how they join together to make words.

Fogg's Readability Scale was introduced to the group. We discussed what it was and why it was useful. The women decided that they did not want to become expert at using the scale because they couldn't see where it would be useful to them. They did say that knowing how the scale works helped them to understand why some material is harder to read.

In order to decide what a short sentence was, we had to look at various kinds of sentence structure. The group looked at the simple, compound, and complex sentence. They decided a short sentence would generally be a simple sentence of not more than ten or twelve words. They did recognize that some sentences could be longer and still be fairly simple to read.

The following two phrases on the first inside panel of the original brochure caused a great deal of difficulty for the group:

YOU ARE NOT ALONE
REACH OUT

Changing them to complete sentences and using upper and lower case letters made them much more readable.

While dealing with this step, the group studied the structure of words and sentences. Compound words were studied, as well as prefixes and suffixes. Sentence structure included subject and predicate, adjectives and adverbs, phrases and clauses, and punctuation. Declarative and command sentences were also discussed.

Point three. Take out ideas that are not needed.
Have only one idea in each paragraph.
Have only one idea in each sentence.

Some of the longer sentences that were confusing to some of the women were taken apart and examined for meaning. They were then rewritten using simpler words and simpler sentences. Because the brochure did not contain paragraphs, this step was only looked at briefly. It did give them the opportunity to edit their work. They had to look critically at what they had written and decide if what they wrote said the same thing as the original text. A comparison of words and sentences accomplished this.

Point four. Use titles and pictures.

The group did not add any titles or pictures to the brochure. We did, however, talk about how this would be important if we were rewriting a story.

Point five. Use the same word all the time to mean the same thing.

We discussed at length the importance of this step. The women could easily name many situations where they had been totally confused because the person with whom they were talking used synonyms. We discussed when it would be appropriate to use synonyms and when it would be better to use the same word throughout a piece to convey meaning. One woman said that it is very confusing for her when people use a lot of words to say the same thing. The thesaurus was used extensively whenever the group was trying to find the perfect word to use. Synonyms and word meaning were discussed at great length.

Point six. Put your ideas in order. Put the main idea first.

The group discussed the sequence in which the goals were written. They felt that all of the goals of AMAC were equally important and that in this case the order had nothing to do with importance. This discussion was excellent as the women had a chance to discuss which goal each thought was most important and why. They then had to listen to the opinion of another woman. It was during this discussion that one of the women mentioned that everyone was right even though there was a difference in opinion. They realized that opinion is very different from fact, yet it was very powerful because opinion is often based in emotion. Each woman realized that the goal she found most important was based on her personal experience and needs.

We also discussed when it would be necessary to make sure ideas were in the right order and that the main idea was stated first.

Point seven. Ask questions to see if the readers understand.

As the group worked on the brochure, the rest of the class was working in another part of the room. Two of the male students would often come over after we were finished with the group work to see what we had done that day. The women would talk to them about what we had done and get their opinion on parts of what was written. We would also ask members of the class their opinion if we had been working on something of which we were unsure. The group depended a lot on the students, the assistant instructor, and a volunteer tutor to give their opinions on what we had written. They saw how something becomes easier to read only because we had been working with it for a period of time. The opinion of others became important to them.

Point eight. At the end, use a few words to retell the main idea.

The group saw other parts of the pamphlet as having this function. They realized that we could not sum up in the same way we would if we had rewritten a story. We did, however, discuss what would go into a summary if what we had written had been done in paragraph form. This allowed a comparison of the two formats, as well.

To summarize, we discussed many academic points during the rewriting of the brochure. Possibly the best part of this whole process was the discussion that the women had about writing. They found the discussions as valuable as the actual writing practice.

The following is a list of topics discussed in the course of the rewrite.

1. We change our language and style depending on why and to whom we are speaking or writing.
2. Vocabulary.
3. Dictionary skills.
4. Context.
5. Thesaurus use.
6. Spelling and word patterns.
7. Syllables and syllabication.
8. Sentence structure.
   a. subjects and verbs
   b. fragments
   c. wordiness
   d. simple sentence
   e. compound sentence
   f. complex sentence
   g. adjectives and adverbs
   h. phrases and clauses
   i. punctuation
9. Word structure.
   a. root word
   b. prefix and suffix
   c. compound words
10. Main idea.
11. Sequencing ideas.
12. Fact and opinion.
13. Importance of feedback.
14. Summarizing.

Rewriting a piece of material is an interesting and different approach to teaching writing skills. This method has become part of our writing program.

Reference:

Doak, Cecilia, Doak, Leonard & Root, Jane. (1985). Teaching patients with low literacy skills. Philadelphia, PA.: Lippincott.

Appendix II: Needlepoint

The women worked very hard to rewrite the brochure. They had all expressed an interest in next doing something fun. We went back to the list of topics that had been brainstormed, and needlepoint was chosen as something they would like to learn. I brought in a number of examples of needlepoint work and a number of pattern books. The women then went out and bought the necessary supplies.

I had intended to do the needlepoint after school and during lunch hour, but again the women took it on with enthusiasm and one half-hour session was not enough. Having turned the last piece into curriculum gave me the idea to use a curriculum approach to needlepoint.

The first piece was reading a chart. The women had to be able to make sense of the directions and the chart. This is a very specialized skill and we practiced by looking at charts and explaining to each other what the symbols and directions meant.

Next, we had to be able to transfer the information we had on the charts into stitches on the cloth. This is not necessarily as easy as it sounds! For example, the women had to learn that one symbol on the chart might mean having to use four holes in the cloth. Also, counting accurately is absolutely essential in needlepoint. If you miscount, the picture does not turn out right.

The women also had to be able to visualize what the finished piece would be like. I encouraged them to choose colours that they felt would look good rather than the colours suggested by the chart.

The academic skills that needlepoint requires are not extensive. Pattern reading can be used as a first step in reading for anyone who is interested in being able to read the patterns. Because it does not take a long time to quickly master all the skills required, this is a very good activity to give a person a quick boost in confidence.

The women in the group thought that pattern reading would be tremendously hard only because no one had ever explained a pattern to them. It took only a few times and a bit of practice before the women were helping each other and I was no longer needed.

At the third workshop, Debbie Heagy took part in a theatre presentation. One of her statements was, "It's freedom — freedom to make your own choices."

Taking chances/Making choices: Reflections on a year of woman-positive activity

Debbie Heagy
Workers' Education for Skills Training (WEST)
Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, Regina, SK

Union-based literacy programs can empower women workers if they pay attention to women's lives. This is the conclusion Nicole Jessop and I came to after a year of woman-positive activity in a literacy program called Workers' Education for Skills Training (WEST). Our work was part of an action research project with the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW). It led not only to my professional growth but also to my personal growth. I had the opportunity to reflect on changes I needed to make — changes that would give me control over where I was going in my life and in my work.

WEST is a worker-controlled union program that operates with the cooperation of management in a variety of workplaces. Workers help other workers increase their reading, writing, math, and communicating skills to enable them to become more confident in their workplaces, unions, and communities. In the fall of 1990, I became involved as a volunteer course leader in my workplace, a large Saskatchewan hospital. I began to see that I could make a difference to others not just by teaching literacy but also by sharing my own increased self confidence.

I have a history of taking chances. I like to take risks. Enthusiasm and flying by the seat of my pants have gone hand-in-hand in helping me overcome some of the challenges I have encountered. Learning on the job and taking advantage of skill development workshops, as well as union membership and increasing union activity, eventually got me to where I was a year ago. I was able to move into jobs because I was confident in my ability to learn and I was able to verbalize that belief. I often thought, "Other women have done this. I can too, given a chance."

When I became involved with the CCLOW research I lived in Saskatoon and Nicole lived in Regina. When we talked together at the first national workshop in Winnipeg, we realized that only a very small number of women participated in WEST as course leaders or as students. We decided to look at why our numbers were so small. We talked to women who got involved in the programs and women who didn't. We talked to men and women taking the training to be course leaders. And, we reflected on our own experiences with the training and with the program.

The research gave me an opportunity to write and talk about my work and my life. I began to look at myself and the effects my work in literacy had on my life as a woman.

Saskatchewan
Federation of
Labour
103-2709
12th St
Regina, SK
S4T 1J3

The connection with other women through the research affirmed my belief that we all have similar concerns, feelings, and observations. We now had a place to talk about our commonalities and share our findings. At the same time, different women put forward their different perspectives and many of them also fit with my own understanding.

The changes I was experiencing led to connections for me, but also to separations. This was part of my personal growth. Some of my friends didn't understand what I was doing. It was like I was a threat to them, like it was safer not to ask too much about my new activites.

My mother's death in 1990 made me realize how unpredictable and unfair life was. I ended up wanting even more somehow to make a difference. My already rocky marriage began to crumble, and eventually it ended. I was growing and changing, and the relationship wasn't

My family supported me through all these changes, but they had a lot of adapting to do, too. My small son has also had to adjust to all the changes. Just that has been a challenge!

All aspects of my life became a continuous cycle of growth and change. Ever since I started in WEST, I had dreamed of some day becoming the program coordinator. During the research, I had the opportunity to apply and I got the job! I became involved in negotiating workplace literacy programs with unions and management, and in training course leaders.

The work was frustrating at times, but very rewarding. It also brought stress, lots of travelling, and long hours. I'd had to move to a new city, which left me as a single parent without the support of my family and friends. I had to take a serious look at my life and where it was going. I had to look at my priorities.

My first priority is my son. I was confident enough to realize that another big decision had to be made. I decided to take another position with the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, a position that would give me job security and allow me to devote more time and energy to my son. Being a woman, I needed to put my family first. I think most women do. And, keeping sanity in my personal life is the best way to keep sanity in the rest of my life. If it's not there, you can't give it to anything else.

I think that, as women, we have to constantly be ready to change and adjust to what is going on in our lives. Although I did not stay in the job, I still feel like I succeeded in what I set out to do. I really enjoy my new job. And it is great to be able to go home, be a "mom" and not worry about travelling, working late at nights, and proper childcare.

Nicole and I often struggled with self-doubts while we were doing the research. Many times we asked ourselves, "Are we doing anything really valuable here, are we wasting time?" But then we'd say, "Well, look what happened with this," and "Look what happened with that," and "Don't you think it's important to talk about what happened to us?" We would finally convince ourselves that, yes, it is important, and yes, we do have something to say here. We had so much trouble believing that our own lives — women's lives — are important!

It's been a very difficult year, but it's been a learning experience, too. I feel that I have gone full circle with my involvement with WEST and with this research. From it I have learned about myself and my capabilities. I also learned that literacy is really important and that it's very difficult for women because of all the barriers in our way. A year ago I would not have thought that literacy was harder for a woman to achieve than a man.

From my involvement with the research, I have met many wonderful women from whom I have learned, among other things, that being a feminist means many things. It means being allowed to make choices — and then feeling comfortable with the choices we make. It means being accepted for who you are and what you believe in.

I learned that women all across Canada live the same kind of lives. Even though we're different races, different ages, different classes, we have a lot of common ground. We learned from each other and leaned on each other for support.

I learned from working with the other women that we all have a purpose in life and we are all connected in some way. No matter what we do as women, it is valuable and important and should be considered so. We have something to say and we should have room to say it. What we feel and experience counts.

Now I hope other women will have new goals and will dream of something better for themselves. And then, take that first "small step."

Nicole works every day with the women who are in her class.

Gaining confidence through woman-positive literacy research

Nicole Jessop
Workers' Education for Skills Training (WEST)
Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, Regina, SK

I don't particularly like to write, but I like to think and talk. When I was trying to work out how to document my experience in the CCLOW research, Betty-Ann Lloyd suggested we work on the two interviews I had with her. This reflection contains pieces of our discussions.

Getting started

In 1991 I was working at a large hotel in Regina. I have worked there as a maid for eight years, ever since I was 15 years old. During that time, I've been involved a lot with my union, RWDSU (Retail, Wholesale, Department Store Union), as a shop steward and as a course leader in the WEST literacy program.

The WEST program coordinator contacted me in October to say that the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) was looking for women to do research on literacy. She had given them my name and wanted to know if I'd be interested. If I was, I would have to go to the first national workshop in Winnipeg, in November. I was pretty unsure at first. I had my doubts about it because I'm not a very outspoken person. I don't get along well in groups. So I didn't know if I wanted to go somewhere where I knew absolutely nobody.

The only time I'd been away from home before was when I trained for the WEST program and that was only forty-five minutes away. I decided I might be able to go if I just refused to think about the actual trip. I knew as soon as I sat back and thought that I was going off with a bunch of women from all over Canada that I've never met before — I knew I would panic. So I purposely didn't think about it until I had to pack.

When I found out that Debbie Heagy from WEST in Saskatoon was also going to the workshop, it helped a lot. We had done our course leader training together and I felt reassured that there would be at least one face I recognized!

I remember my first ideas about what it might mean to do research. In my mind we were going to go to the workshop and get lists of research questions to ask people. That's the only research I've ever had contact with so that's what I figured was going to happen. When we ended up kind of doing our own research, I was a little amazed.

Saskatchewan
Federation of
Labour
103-2709
12th St
Regina, SK
S4T 1J3

In Winnipeg, Debbie and I decided we would look at why there were so few women course leaders. I knew that some would give the answer, "It's because the unions involved are male dominated." Well then, why are male-dominated unions picked for WEST programs in the first place? Why wasn't there a conscious effort to make it half and half, male and female?

I realized I don't think there are enough women involved in a lot of things. The unions and the federation of labour stress women's issues and equality — and yet it seems like they don't practise it themselves. In my union we're about eighty percent women and we've got no real representation in the executive. We finally have one woman now that is an organizer.

I saw the research as kind of an "in" to getting at why women aren't more involved. Not only why women aren't more involved in literacy but why they aren't more involved in other aspects of their life. I think some of it is literacy. A lot of women don't come to meetings because they figure they won't understand what's being said.

But I also think the union is one place in our life where we don't have to take care of anything. The men will take care of the union business. When you're taking care of the house and the kids and everything else, it's one place where you don't have to worry. You go to somebody else and they fix it.

I think this could be both good and bad. When you have men fixing all your problems in the union, they're not always fixed the way you want them to be. And most men would really have to be trained well to understand a woman's views or problems as well as a woman would. She knows what she's going through and most men can't relate to it.

The research process

Once we got started, I found doing the research really exciting. I had to try and control myself sometimes because I'd come home and start to think about all these wonderful things we could do and it would end up being ten years worth of work! I'd thought about going to the classes to find out why women aren't coming out in the workplace, or what happens if you have a man in a woman-dominated workplace or vice versa — are the issues felt the same?

In the end, because of things happening in our lives and because the WEST program lost its funding for a while, the research ended up mainly being us looking at ourselves as women in the program: what we had to go through to be course leaders, what the training was like for us as women, how literacy has changed us, and how we've helped other people.

Sometimes it didn't feel like we were doing research at all! It was more like keeping a diary instead of doing a research project because it was all about us . Even when I interviewed the one other woman course leader, it didn't seem so much like research because a lot of what she was experiencing, I was experiencing the same! I was interested in it and, to me, research was something you didn't care about. In school you research how the giraffe lives.

Nobody really cares, but that's what you're supposed to do. This didn't seem like research because it was interesting!

Woman-positive/ feminist

During the research I thought quite a bit about "woman-positive" and "feminist," and what they meant to me. Until this research, I don't know if I'd ever heard of the term woman-positive. Probably not. And yet, in a way, everything we did in my workplace was for women, because it's an all female workplace. And my course has always been all female. Everything that's done is done with women in mind — increased maternity leave, better childcare, and benefits so your kids can get their teeth done. We never think of anything as being woman-positive. We think of doing it because it's for us, women.

To me, "feminist" is a pretty loaded term. I relate it to something negative, not something positive. Though, in a way, it does depend on the context — who's using the term and how they're using it. When my supervisor told me she thought of me as a feminist, I didn't take offence. I was kind of proud of that.

Where I come from it's almost an insult to be called a feminist. But then in terms of what I think I am, a lot of people would label that as feminist. So I guess it matters who's saying it and what context it's in whether I'd label myself one or not. That's a change because of the research. It has helped me realize that when somebody comes up and says, "Yes, I'm a feminist," I should actually listen to what they have to say instead of saying, "Oh my god, not one of them." Now I would listen and say, "What do you mean by that? What do you believe in?" I'd try to understand if their beliefs were the same as mine.

At this point, in my own mind, if I was to call myself a feminist, then I'd say that woman-positive and feminist are the same thing. Because if I am feminist, with my beliefs, then feminism is also woman-positive.

Union activism

People always ask me why I am so involved with the union, why I keep fighting so hard for things that I believe in. They don't understand why I don't just get another job — especially when we were on the picket line last winter. We were up there for eight months. People kept saying, "You're young, you could get another job anywhere."

I had to think about why I keep on doing this work. I guess, at this point, I feel I can afford to spend two, three, four years doing this. I'll still be young and then I can go get another job if I want to. Maybe it's because I am young that I want so badly to make a difference.

A lot of the people involved in unions are much older than I am. I was thrown on the picket lines when I was 18. The first literacy class I did was in my house because we were on the picket line. Really, I think I grew up on one. Maybe that's why I have so many problems with the way things get done in the union or the federation. I'm young, I keep thinking, "What are you doing in there? Do something! Come on!"

I'm not 45 and with kids, saying, "Oh well, we'll let the next generation worry about it." I am the next generation and I'm going to worry about it! If not for me, for my kids, because in another twenty years things have got to get better. They just can't keep going like they are. And I've still got sixty years of work left in me. That's a long time. So something's got to be done.

It doesn't always feel like I have a choice about doing this work. I know I do, I could just walk away, but it feels like this is what I have to do. That's even true when I'm thinking that the more I see, the more I want to close my eyes.

Involvement in literacy

That's how I ended up involved in literacy. I wanted changes to happen. I was a shop steward and the women would come to me and say, "Can a boss do this to you?" And I'd say, "No," and they'd go back and yell at the boss. But they didn't have the confidence to look it up in the contract or Health and Safety Laws. They couldn't do that. They depended on me.

I'm hoping with the literacy that they will be able to find out things for themselves. So that they can read about it and actually prove it to somebody if they are ever questioned. They can say, "It's right here," instead of saying, "Well, you know, somebody told me."

Not only do you have to educate people around reading, writing, and math, but you have to teach them to be critical. You have to teach them how to criticize what they read and what they see. I really think that education could empower. I think we have to educate people to criticize their unions and say "Hey, you're not going to do that to me anymore. I'm not going to let you do that to me anymore. How come you can make $100,000 a year and keep increasing my dues and not getting me a raise? If I'm going to take roll back, you better too."

I think that's where the resistance comes into everything you do to empower people — especially about literacy and learning. If everyone learns more, then those who have power will be held more accountable for their actions. They never seem to learn that if you give everybody a little bit of power, you have a lot more than when you started.

It's hard working in the hospitality industry. Often, the women are immigrants and it can be very frightening. It's very, very degrading to try and work in a job like this, you know. You have to try and find something women can be proud of, whether it's their kids or some other activity. In the hospitality industry you don't get a pat on the back for many of the things you do. I always hope the literacy program will bring up the women's self-esteem.

What I learned

A lot of what I learned from being involved in the research was personal. I learned to speak out more and to believe that I had something to say that was worth saying. It might not always matter to the person I'm talking to at the time but, sooner or later, somebody might listen. Doing this research made me realize that maybe I'm not wrong thinking that I do have some thoughts that will count for something, that maybe people will listen. It was kind of a security blanket: "I'm part of this national research and they want me to be involved, so maybe you should listen to me."

Even just learning that I can go away from home all alone and be okay was important for me. I'd never flown before going to Winnipeg for the first workshop and getting on the airplane by myself and getting off in a strange province by myself was quite the trying experience. It was a little better going to the second workshop in Toronto and much better going to the third one in Ottawa.

Being involved in the research also made a difference in my relationship with my husband. It was hard sometimes, but it has helped us a lot. We'd lived together for four years, and when we were on the picket line for eight months, we spent twenty-four hours a day together. We went home together, we got up together, we picketed together. Everything was done together. It was a real strain on our relationship to stop that.

The research project has helped because he's had to see me go away more often. It has really helped me draw a line. I've said: "It's got to be like that. There are going to be things in life that I can do that you can't do with me. And there are going to be things in life that you're going to do without me, and we've got to get used to that."

Connecting with the other women across the country also made a big difference to the women in the literacy course I was running in my workplace. One of the greatest things that helped the women in my course was the knowledge that there are a lot of women out there exactly the same as them. It didn't matter if you were on the other side of Canada, or if you were up north. It really gave them a confidence that they weren't the excluded group. That was the nicest part about this research, the connection with everybody else.

The other major thing I learned from the connection with other women across the country was how violence is a part of all of our programs. The more we talked with everyone else, the more we saw how our problems here are the same as everybody's across the country. Violence and abuse and harassment just kept coming up. It's not only here but in courses all over. To this day that amazes me. I had never put it all together before.

At one time all three of the women that were in my class — three out of three — had been abused. I just thought that was a strange coincidence. When I talked to the other women in the research project and found out the high percentage of women that had been abused it was amazing. It was unreal.

When I came back from Toronto, I told the women that we had discussed this whole issue of violence and abuse and how women just like them in courses across the country are being abused. That was the biggest thing to my students, that they weren't the only ones, that they weren't alone.

SFL-WEST

"Union-based literacy programs empower women workers when they pay attention to women's lives."

Two women course leaders discovered this during an action research project that looked at woman-positive literacy programming. The research was sponsored by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat.

Do you have a safe ride home after class?

Are there any programs where most of the workers are women?

What if I get more education than him?

What if she doesn't speak English?

Will we be respected by fellow workers?

Who looks after the kids?

Who will make supper?

What about the men?

Is this for Native women too?

Who will encourage her?

Where will women find time for literacy?

What will happen if I change?

How can we begin?

We can begin by asking these questions and by working together to find some solutions.

Where? **When?**

FUTURE OF OPPORTUNITY

WEST

contact:

Saskatchewan Federation of Labour
Workers' Education for Skills Training

Nicole Jessop and Debbie Heagy designed this poster for use in the WEST program.

The staff at Rabbittown Learners Program worked together to reach out to women in their community. From left: Betty Jackson, Cathy Short, Sandra Cadwell, Bella Biddiscombe.

Uncovering fear and isolation in Rabbittown: A woman-positive literacy project

Frances Ennis with Shirley Hickey, Bella Biddiscombe, Sandra Cadwell, Betty Jackson, and Cathy Short
Rabbittown Learners Program, St. John's, NF

For the first couple of years most of the participants in the Rabbittown Learners Program were women. Then we noticed a shift: the women stopped coming and more men became involved. We were concerned and puzzled about this change, and we wondered what was going on in women's lives to bring about this shift. Because we are located in a public housing community and most of the women learners and workers live in that community, we thought we should be able to find out what was happening.

In November, 1991, three students and five staff members came together for a workshop to examine barriers to women's participation in literacy programs. By the end of the day we concluded that violence and a lack of support in women's lives were the two major barriers that stop them from coming to literacy programs.

We identified an action plan to encourage more women to participate in the program and three months later we had twenty women learners. However they were all referrals from two social service agencies in the city. We continued to wonder, "Where are the women from the immediate community?" and "Why aren't they coming to the Centre?"

The Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) was about to begin phase two of their research on women and literacy. Since we had participated in phase one, they asked us to become one of the twelve programs to carry out a woman-positive activity and document what happened as a result.

This came at an ideal time. We decided that our woman-positive activity would be to somehow connect with women in the community to find out why more of them were not participating in programs at the Centre. We had another workshop to decide exactly what we wanted to do. Participants in this workshop included two women learners and the Rabbittown staff.

At one point in the workshop we divided into small groups to make a collage of photos from different events and activities at the centre and to write captions for the photos. After each group shared their collage, everyone was asked to identify key words that reflected the feelings and emotions evident in the photos. This led to a discussion and recognition of the strong sense of belonging, support, and comfort people feel here at the Centre.

Rabbittown
Learners
Program
26 Graves St
St. John's, NF
A1B 3C5

We then spent some time thinking about what goes on inside the homes in the community and the picture began to change. We talked about the intense isolation so many women experience, the violence that occurs in their lives, the pressures of financial insecurity, the stresses associated with family responsibilities, and drug and alcohol abuse.

We know that for ourselves becoming involved in programs at the Centre helped relieve some of the isolation, stresses and pressures of our lives. More than ever we wanted to encourage women to take the first step, to get involved. We didn't despair, but our hopes plummeted as we acknowledged our suspicions that fear of violence, fear of recrimination, and fear of failure are the biggest barriers that women face.

At the workshop, we concluded that our only possible hope of reaching women was through personal contact. We decided that going door-to-door to visit with women in the community would be our woman-positive activity. The staff agreed to devote one day a week to this activity until they had visited, or had attempted to visit, the woman in every household in the area.

We developed a questionnaire to use as an ice breaker and to focus our discussions. For the most part the questions invited women to give their opinions because we felt women would be more likely to talk if they didn't feel as though they were being asked personal questions. We asked them about programs that might be of interest to women and things that might make it difficult for women to participate.

Reflections — End of February 1992

We were feeling a little uneasy going door-to-door with our questionnaires. We didn't know what kind of reception people would give us, but we headed out with an air of confidence we didn't entirely feel.

The morning was great. We were invited into three homes. People were hesitant at first, but when they found out we were not from housing they relaxed and chatted. The women readily opened up when they realized we have so many things in common.

Although the response was good, in the afternoon we felt a little depressed. We visited one lady who had just lost her husband and we felt as though we were invading her privacy. The stories women were telling us were sad — there's a lot of poverty out there. Older people were very friendly and chatty. There was a sense of loneliness with them but at the same time, for the most part, they seemed contented.

Mostly single moms invited us into their homes. We felt that the women we visited with were very lonely and needed to talk with someone about their problems. We sensed that some of these women were experiencing abuse. One woman spoke of words like "slut" and "whore" being used to describe her.

We completed thirteen questionnaires today, our first day.

We began our conversations with women by talking a little about ourselves and describing the programs that are available to them at the community centre. Then **we asked if they thought any of these programs could help women.** With the exception of five women who responded negatively, all the others emphasized how important it is to provide a space for women to interact with other women, to share issues and concerns in a supportive environment. Their reasons ranged from providing a support group for women who are experiencing violence in their lives to providing a place for social activities.

Support groups for women were seen as very important. Some felt support groups would help women develop more self-confidence, and better self-concepts, while others simply stated that women have a lot going on in their lives and need a place to go to talk. One woman said, "If I became involved in a program it would be to interact with other women who have similar interests. This would give me someone else to talk to besides the kids."

Some women wanted somewhere to go for advice on dealing with their children. Support for women who are being abused and for women who are dealing with alcoholism or who have "problems at home" were mentioned as particular needs. Nine women identified Al-Anon as an important program at the Centre.

Women said the literacy program was important, mainly to upgrade education and increase self-esteem, but also to meet other people. The pre-school program was valued by women because it allowed them to go to work or to join in the learners programs. Some women also specified that it is good for the children, allowing them to mix with other children and helping them to learn.

Several women talked about how convenient it was to have a public health clinic at the centre.

Reflections — Mid March 1992

This week one of the staff was a little depressed. She didn't feel like going out with the survey but said, "I'm glad I did because the women really wanted to talk."

This door-to-door visiting is hard to do because the women's stories are so heart-wrenching. There is so much poverty and abuse that we are often left feeling helpless. The only thing we can do is listen, lend support and encourage the women to come to the Centre and get involved.

When I did a similar survey in 1986, I often had the same feelings of helplessness. I knew a lot of these women and I was so surprised that they were living in poverty and being abused. It just blew my mind because these are the same women who always seem to have it together. I have learned that this is a wall most women put up to hide what is really going on in their lives.

> We are finding that a lot of people just won't answer their doors even after a couple of attempts. This is embarrassing for the person as well as for us. So far, we are getting into about two percent of the homes. On one side of a small street not one person answered their door. Betty and Cathy could see the people watching them when they went to the other side of the street. That's very discouraging. We suggested they leave the questionnaires in the mailbox and go back later to pick them up. They didn't want to do that so they'll try again.
>
> The questions don't seem to be working out; people don't seem to understand them. So we are re-wording them as we go. This is working much better and it makes for a much more casual conversation.

Before we even started the survey, we believed that there was a need for programs specifically for women at the Centre. But we needed to confirm our belief by actually talking about it with women in the community. We asked them, **"Would you as a woman like to be involved in programs with other women?"**

Most of them said, "Yes." Many indicated that programs in general were good for women, if only to get them out of the house — sometimes without the children. Many women said such programs would keep them active, allow them to meet and get to know other women, keep them involved in and informed about their community. One woman who was recently divorced said that she never goes out and she would like to begin to live again.

Another woman we interviewed is involved with the Learners Program, the Women's Group, Kirby House (shelter for battered women and children), and Al-Anon. She said: "I'm going through a divorce. I was controlled by my husband. I find it difficult to be on my own, but the support I get from groups helps me to get on with my life."

> **Reflections — End of March 1992**
>
> People are still not answering their doors. When a man answers the door he will often say that the woman is not home, but we have a feeling she is. Many of the same issues are coming up again and again: abuse, isolation, childcare and household responsibilities, financial insecurity, lack of support from family, husband and community.
>
> Sometimes it feels like a lot of women are not interested in anything outside their homes.
>
> One woman, when asked about the Centre, talked about homosexuals keeping women from going to any centre. She was referring to the media representation of a recent "lesbian scare" at our local Women's Centre, which forced it to close. She went on to say: "My husband doesn't want me to go anywhere, there's no trust. Some men think women should stay home and tend on them."
>
> Another woman responded to our questions about the Centre by

asking, "What difference will it make if I get involved in outside activities or go to the Centre? Will it put food on my table? Will it pay my bills?"

When asked, **"Has there ever been a time in your life when you were involved in outside activities?"** thirty percent of the women responded negatively. The seventy percent who said "yes" indicated that they were involved in a range of activities: darts, crafts, outdoor sports, swimming, walking, tennis, camping, dances, bingo, drinks with friends, parents' programs, and women's groups.

When we asked these women why they had stopped these activities, for the most part they indicated it was due to family responsibilities — caring for children or a disabled family member. Others said their outside involvement was an inconvenience to the family, it was too much of a hassle. Some women had stopped participating in outside activities due to lack of funds, work commitments, relocation, personal crisis, or medical problems.

Reflections — Mid April 1992

It's still the same thing: people are not answering their doors. The men are clearly stopping us from talking with women. When we do talk with the women, the issues are sounding very repetitive. We are seeing lots of patterns.

Sometimes Bella and Sandra visit alternate houses. In one instance the man and the woman were home and Bella asked if they knew anything about the Rabbittown Community Centre. The man answered, "Yes" and he said, "It's okay for you (the woman) to fill out the form." When Bella began talking about women he told her to get out. By mistake Sandra went to the same house and he answered the door. He said, "My wife is out and she's not filling out any goddamn forms about women!"

Sometimes the second visits pay off. A single mother explained that she couldn't talk to us before because of her boyfriend. He was abusive to her. We could talk to her now because her boyfriend was in jail. She is under a lot of stress right now because of her situation and she has had a death in the family. She would like to become involved with other women because, "It might help me from going insane."

One woman spoke freely about the courses she would like to take, and the restrictions she faced from her husband and her childcare responsibilities. Part way through the questionnaire her husband came home and the conversation became very strained. The woman said very little after his arrival.

When we asked, **"Would you like to become involved in any of the programs but find it difficult?"** many women said yes. They indicated that the main difficulties they faced were family obligations, finances, and poor health. Some women said they would need to be freed up from housework to become involved. One stated, "I put my children first." Several women would like to go back to school if they could afford it or if they could afford childcare. Others would like to be more active but their health makes it too difficult. They have difficulty walking, or breathing, or they have bad backs. Some said health conditions made it too much of a burden to get ready to go out.

> ### Reflections — End of April 1992
>
> The information is still very much the same. Women are telling us the same stories about domestic violence, childcare, financial problems, single parents trying to live on welfare, and the list goes on. Life seems very bleak for a lot of women. They want to do something for themselves but many are kept back by their partners. Others just can't afford babysitters or transportation, or they feel they can't dress well enough to go out. So they don't bother.
>
> One woman suggested that women could get together and share their resources and skills. Women could babysit for each other and do some car pooling. Women who sew could do that for others in return for some homemade bread or whatever.
>
> Things are getting difficult here at Rabbittown. We haven't had any funding since last November and we're still waiting to hear about our last grant. If we would just get some funding we would have a lot more incentive to really get something going for at least the women who seem to want to get out.

We asked women, **"What do you think is happening in women's lives that might stop them from coming to these programs?"** They spoke movingly of the barriers women face everyday that keep them isolated and alone.

Many spoke of the insecurity and shame women feel. They talked about how hard many women find it to mix with others, to meet new people, and to go to new places — especially the first time. This is particularly hard for women who have been "out of things" for a long time. One woman said, "I only go to the Shoppers Drug Mart. I have one friend and she lives upstairs." Others talked about being afraid of other people and of fearing others would think they are stupid. Some suggested that if a woman has an alcoholic husband, and perhaps there are fights, she would be ashamed to go out in the community in case she was recognized.

Childcare was another major barrier women identified. They talked about being unable to get babysitters and about being unable to afford babysitters. One woman said quite bluntly, "I have no money for a babysitter which makes it hard to get involved in anything." Some women said they don't believe in leaving their children with babysitters. Others simply stated that women who have children just don't have any extra time.

Men's resistance to women's participation was named as a common obstacle. "When women try to improve their lives, men start to hold them back." Some women said their husbands control what they do and prevent them from going out, even for a few hours. As one woman said, "I feel some husbands just don't want their wives to go out. They use lack of money for an excuse for not going anywhere."

Household responsibilities and family obligations may prevent some women from being more active and involved. Apart from the difficulties posed by resistant husbands and by lack of childcare, many women simply have too much to do in running their homes and taking care of their families. They are too busy. "I feel some women don't allow time for themselves — their families take up a lot of time." Women talked about having too much going on in the house to relax. Others spoke of their inflexible schedules — cooking and housework need to be done at certain times of the day and can't be put off till later.

Women gave lots of other reasons why women might not get involved in programs. Some thought others might not want to help themselves. Some felt many women are not well informed. Simply not being interested in "programs" was one possibility — preferring to go to bingo or to have a beer at a pub.

Reflections — Mid May 1992

> We were all very pleased with our community visits today. The response was great. It's interesting to note that some areas of Rabbittown are more receptive than others. We don't know why this is. Of course today it might simply have been the beautiful weather.
>
> Women talked today about wanting to interact with other women, about wanting to take control of their own lives. They spoke passionately about women being equal to men, and needing education and self-esteem. We all felt very positive today.

When we asked, **"Do you think women become interested in the same types of programs as men?"** we got quite a range of responses! Most women seemed to think men have different interests than women, being more interested in sports, for example. Men were thought to have very different ideas about women's lives and to be uninterested in what women need and want for themselves.

Some women argued that women feel more comfortable in a women's group, that it affords them a feeling of equality. One woman had a good idea for programs at the Centre. She suggested a weight loss program at minimal cost and women teaching each other different kinds of crafts. On the other hand, many women felt strongly that women want the same things as men, have the same interests as men, and are certainly just as good as men. "Women are interested in the same types of programs as men. Why do you think we burned our bras? Women are interested in everything that men do."

Finally, some of the women we talked with said that husbands and wives like to do things together. "When my husband was alive we did everything together." They would prefer programs that accommodate that desire.

Reflections — End of May 1992

We've completed our community visits. Out of a potential of approximately 270 women we were only able to have discussions with seventy-six of them. We feel good about talking with so many women but we feel badly about the women we did not reach. We did the best we could; each home was approached at least twice.

A high number of women in one particular area were not at home and the person answering the door said they were out working. We found that interesting because there are so few jobs available and many of the people in this area are on some form of government assistance. Wouldn't they be at home? Perhaps the person answering the door didn't want us to talk with the woman.

In many instances, people would just not answer the door. Clearly people were inside and on several occasions someone would be seen peeking out behind a curtain. In other instances, a man would answer the door and say the woman is not interested, but he would not even tell her we were there to see her.

Some women were just not interested in talking with us and indicated they had nothing to say. In a lot of cases we felt the woman didn't want to talk because men were home. In several instances a discussion would be underway with a woman and the man would butt in or answer a question. The woman would then say, in one form or another, "I'm really not interested in this."

For the most part, older women were not interested in completing the questionnaire. They did often welcome us in for a cup of tea and were quite happy with the company and an opportunity to show photos and talk about their family members. In general this was the group who appeared to be most contented with their lot in life.

We were quite interested in how women thought about the possibility of making changes in their lives. At one point in the questionnaire we asked them, **"Do you know women who have decided to make changes in life?"** Almost all of the women who said they did spoke about women getting more education. Some used themselves as an example: "Myself — got my GED." Another said, "Me, I'm trying to get my children in full-time daycare so I will be capable of going back to school and feel like I'm a person and not just a somebody."

Other women spoke admiringly about friends and relatives who went back to school or found jobs: "My daughter went back to school." "I know of somebody who went back to school and is now taking a trade." "My sister, she started work to support herself and her baby girl."

Reflections — Mid June 1992

We took some time to reflect on how we felt about going door-to-door, doing this survey. Here are some of the comments we wrote:

When I first realized that we were going to take on a woman-positive activity I felt excited. I would be going door-to-door with another woman with a questionnaire that would deal only with women.

I felt good at the beginning. When we went knocking on doors my feelings changed and I felt like an intruder because most people didn't want to talk to us.

It was with a touch of anticipation and dread that I first went out because I knew what it was like going door-to-door from a previous experience. Not all the people in the area are overly friendly and I knew we would not always get a good reception. Most of the people have problems and are cautious about who is coming to their door. We live in a housing development and I knew some people would think we were there to spy on them.

Each week I was starting to wish we were finished, but when I got to talk to the women I felt good. Some of their answers to our questions were very enlightening, but I think basically all of the women said the same thing. Each one was worried about money and childcare.

I don't think I would like to do a door-to-door survey again. It was an experience and I needed to do it. I just wish more women would talk to us. My biggest wish is to be able to do something to help those women who want to improve their lives.

I was certainly more enthusiastic on bright, warm mornings. I got energetic as soon as I went through the door and usually wanted to go on all day long.

There are days I came back to the Centre feeling really downhearted by some of the stories. The women's stories are mostly sad and it's hard not to be touched by them. Some women are trying to improve their lives but they come up against a lot of barriers.

Now that we're finished, I don't think we need to go through the questionnaires to find the commonalities. On every page of every questionnaire we see violence, poverty, and loneliness. The despair in the young women especially is loud and clear. They are in situations that make life seem hopeless. They either don't know they have choices or they don't want to leave the situation — we don't really know. Or do they really have choices?

We can't help but wonder, what will happen to the children? Will they end up in the cycle of poverty and despair? Or by having the know-how and strength, will they be able to have a better life?

> We do know that we want to do something to help some of these women. We don't have a plan just yet, but we are going to put a lot of thought into this.

When we asked, **"Have you ever visited the Centre?"** forty-four women responded yes. They had participated in a wide range of activities, including Alcoholics Anonymous, card parties, support groups, and community day.

Some women have been to the centre for one reason or another but have not become involved in any of the programs because they think it costs money. Lack of transportation prevents others from participating.

Reflections — End of June 1992

> It's been six months since our last grant. Monies are completely depleted. We have to borrow money to pay our bills. I wish I could feel as sunny as the day is outside. This money business, or lack of it, is really depressing. And my hormones are out of whack, which doesn't help. Anyway, we'll see what tomorrow brings.

Asking **"Do you think women today are starting to be more independent and want to be in control of their lives?"** prompted many comments from women. These were perhaps the most inspiring and optimistic comments we got to the whole questionnaire. Women spoke very clearly about being tired of being controlled by others. They said women are more independent and want better lives for themselves. Whereas "men used to rule the roost," women are no longer content to depend on men: "We've been long enough letting men take over, we need to stand on our two feet."

As one woman said, "It's about time, women no longer want to be pushed around." Women described themselves and their friends as being fed up. They stated that it is no longer women's place simply to be in the home and bear children. "Slowly but surely, they need to know their life belongs to them." Several women emphasized that women really have to fight for their rights.

A few women were clearly bitter and angry about their experiences with men. One woman expressed her anger particularly forcefully:

> I love the single life, men are piss-poor shit. If they were any good they wouldn't have been born. I shouldn't put men down in general. Seventy-five percent are all out for one thing. Women are trying to do something with their lives. Men call women sluts and whores if they try to improve their lives.

Most, though, simply talked quite hopefully and determinedly about the things women are already doing — and the things women will continue to do — to improve the quality of their lives. "A woman feels the need to be financially independent; having this kind of independence puts a woman in control of her life." "Women are realizing there is more out there for women. They want to accomplish something — self-improvement."

This last set of comments was perhaps the most exciting for reflection and interpretation. For us they were indications of optimism and hope. They meant that "times have changed" and "women see things in a different light," as one woman said. We are optimistic enough to believe this could become a self-fulfilling philosophy. Simply naming concepts of equality, independence, and freedom is in and of itself a change for women in Rabbittown. We are sure that five or ten years ago these words would not have even been uttered by so many women. Perhaps this means little, but we hope and believe it means a lot.

We also think that perhaps the emphasis women placed on these concepts along with their earlier statements about the importance of programs for women is an indication of their personal interest in change. Our questions were deliberately worded to ask opinions about women's lives in general. But we had the clear sense that when women responded, most of them were talking about their own lives, about their own personal experiences. If our senses are correct, then there are a number of women out there who are personally ready to make a change. We will test this out with follow-up visits to the women who participated in the activity.

Today we have a clearer picture of the reality of women's lives in our community. The barriers for some seem insurmountable, but if we can help even one woman this activity has been worth the effort.

The following excerpts are from a publication produced by the Aboriginal Women and the Workplace program at Keyano College, Fort McMurray, AB, as part of this research project.

[redacted]

Native Women Write Now

Description of Research: Native Women Write Now

During 1991-92 Keyano College participated in a national research project sponsored by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, and funded by the National Literacy Secretarial on the issue of women and literacy. I participated by offering a writing workshop for aboriginal women who were involved in a program entitled Aboriginal Women and the Workplace. This 24 week program, funded by Employment and Immigration Canada, aimed to enhance the employability skills of native women by providing life skills and academic upgrading that would lead to successful completion of the GED. The writing skills workshop component was seen as complementary given its three goals: to increase the confidence of the women as writers, to encourage women to see writing as a vehicle for exploring their experience, and to increase their understanding of writing as a process.

The writing workshop was unique because of its women-centred approach. The women suggested the topics for writing, and their suggestions emerged from their respective personal, academic, and professional standpoints. The stories, poems, opinion pieces and book reviews clearly reflect their values, beliefs, and life situations. Throughout the workshops the women were strengthened by the ready acceptance of their positions, and the opportunity to explore and articulate those positions. Reading and discussion provided a foundation for the writing.

What the women have to say about their lives and about the lives of others who are important to them is a clear signal that literacy activities provide a worthy vehicle for personal growth and empowerment. But the learning is not all theirs. As readers, we can learn more about ourselves and our lives by reflecting upon their ideas. Their ideas can become our point of departure.

- ***Nancy Steel, Instructor***

Editor:
Nancy Steel

Contributors:
Alberta M., Dorothy C., Joanne R., Tina C., Maggie, Tina D., Elizabeth, Betty Ann L., Audrey G., Lynn R., Marie N., Norma G.

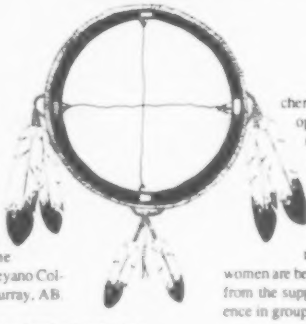
Design/Artwork
Becky Holuk

Printed by :
Jean's Printing, Fort McMurray

Funded by:
Keyano College Foundation

Aboriginal Women in the Workplace program participants enjoy a graduation moment in March, 1992

Preface



This booklet was written by women in a program called Aboriginal Women in the Workplace at Keyano College, Fort McMurray, AB.

Part of this course involved a writing workshop that offered us an opportunity to express our feelings about being native and being women. We shared a lot of ideas, had lively discussions, and expressed individual opinions. All this happened in a very short period of time because the program was 24 weeks long.

These poems, stories, essays and book reviews reflect yesterday's and today's cherished memories, opinions, and values. These pieces were written with humour, joy, pain, acceptance and hope for the future. We feel women are becoming stronger from the support they experience in groups like ours.

We invite you to explore our ideas, and experiences, and then to reflect and keep the circle strong.

Special thanks to Nancy Steel for giving us encouragement and inspiration to write these pieces.

- ***Aboriginal Women***

In Hope to Return

I want to tell you about a place where my family hopes to return.

Long ago, there was a place called the Paul Cree Band reserve, where my husband Robert, his family and their forefathers originally came from. It's a beautiful place in the summer. It has scenery that you can dream about, and wake up smiling. There are hills that look over the Christina River and the Clearwater River that blend together so peacefully, the quietness and stillness astounds you. The breeze of freshness clears your mind. The smell of flowers flows through the air. It's like the garden of Eden in the summer time.

In the autumn you can see the small wildlife prepare for the winter. They store their berries and collect straw to make their home warm.

When winter arrives it's hard and cold. You can stand and listen to hear the trees crackle and the animals whisper. The blankets of snow are pure and untouched. The rivers are frozen, but safe to cross.

This reserve is approximately 12 miles from Fort McMurray. The only way to the reserve in the summer is to go by boat up the Clearwater River. If you go by land you must use a recreational vehicle. Keyano College Training Students have been constructing a road to the reserve, that they have partially completed. During the winter months, there is a road that can be ploughed up to the reserve.

Band members used to live there, but because there is no permanent road they have moved. The only way in and out, at that time, was by boat. Most of the members came into the city of Fort McMurray and squatted in Waterways, where they stayed for quite a few years, until the city evicted them from this place. At this time the Department of Indian Affairs got involved. They made arrangements for these people to temporarily reside on the Gregoire Lake Reserve. Original members of the Paul Cree Band look forward to the day when they can go home.

— Tina C.

My Trip Back to My Mom

In 1971, my brother, my two sisters and I were living in a foster home in Edmonton. The people we were living with were a very nice couple. We really enjoyed living there and we were quite surprised to come home one day to find out that we were being sent to live with my Mom.

Our Mom happened to be living in Vancouver, B.C. at the time. Anyways, we came home from school and our foster parents had our bags packed. We were told that we were going to catch a plane that very night to Vancouver. I remember I had mixed feelings at the time. On one hand I was so surprised that we were leaving, I didn't have any idea where my Mom was living at the time, or that she wanted us back living with her. I also remember that I was sad that I couldn't say good-bye to my friends, but at the same time, I was very happy that my Mom wanted us back and that we were going to ride on a big plane.

I remember that our plane was supposed to leave at 7 p.m. but we didn't leave Edmonton until 2:00 a.m. Once we got settled on the plan everyone went to sleep. I was too excited to sleep, so I stayed awake the whole trip. We got to Vancouver at 5 a.m., and I remember that we went outside at the airport and there was no snow on the ground, but lots of green grass (all this happened in January)! No one was at the airport waiting for us. I don't remember how it happened, but we ended up in a taxi and we went to my Mom's place.

To add to this excitement, I also found out that my Mom got married again and we had a new baby brother. I found out that my two older sisters were also living in Vancouver, so our long trip ended in a sort of family reunion.

— Maggie S.

The Trip North

My mother got a call from her sister. "Please come, I need you" she said. My aunt's two young sons had been in a fatal accident. She wanted to see my Mom. They had not seen each other for twelve years.

Mother decided to go to her sister, and she asked me to go with her. We were to catch a plane from Fort McMurray to Fort Chipewyan. We would meet my uncle Tom and go with him to Fort Fitzgerald by boat.

We got to Fort Chip and we met my uncle. The plan was to stop at my grandmother's trapline overnight, and then continue on the next morning. We left Fort Chip about one p.m. My mother was in a very reflective mood, pointing out land marks, telling stories. Although this trip was not a happy trip, she seemed excited and anxious.

The September afternoon was warm, a good day for a boat ride. The boat was fully loaded. Mom sat up in the bow with me. We were, for a change, the lightest people in the boat. My aunt, who weighed three hundred pounds, was laying in the middle of the boat, so we were perched up front. This was perfect for Mom as she pointed out spots she remembered as a child, the creek she and her brothers swam in, and the spot where her father shot a mink.

"But mom, how could he have hit a mink at that distance?" I asked her. "He was a sniper in the war, Alberta," she answered.

She turned and gazed toward the river bank, and I watched the years roll away in her dark brown eyes.

— Alberta M.

A Memorable Event

I remember a certain night when my sister and I were left alone because my mother had to go to a town meeting. We heard a noise outside, so we checked out the window. Whew! It was only the dog. So we started playing cards. Just then, the dog started growling and barking. We could hear somebody outside! I could feel my heart thumping so hard and fast, you would think it was ten drums beating wildly in a big dark cave.

Just then, a man started hollering at our dog. We peered out the window and saw a tall man with a cap and dark clothes. He was staggering towards our door with a .22 rifle in his hand. Naturally we got scared, so we locked the door and ran to the bedroom. While we were whimpering and standing on the bed, the man hollered "Open this door" and wiggled the doorknob. "I want to see your mom!" Darlene, my sister, yelled back, "She's not home! Go away!" Then he said, "I have a gun here!" Darlene looked toward the window by the door and said, "Oh, no! He's pointing the gun at the door! He's going to shoot the door down!" We screamed, ran around the bedroom wildly, and then huddled on the bed. Darlene said, "Sshh! Let's get the B-B gun, and he'll think we have a real gun." So I said "Yeah! You grab it," and she did. She ran towards the door with the B-B gun, and pointed it at the door. "I have a gun here, and if you don't leave here I'll shoot it towards the door!" He must have gotten scared, because he turned and, half staggering and half running, he hollered back, "No, don't shoot. Tell your mom I'll see her tomorrow!" Then we started laughing and catching our breath!

My mother pulled up just then and came inside. She looked at us and asked, "What happened to you two?" So we told the whole story and later found out that this guy wanted to sell that gun to mother for some money. But, boy! Were we ever glad we had that B-B gun that night.

— Joanne R.

Physical and Sexual Abuse

I was young, naive and had little understanding of what the world was all about. Alcohol was an enemy for as long as I can remember. It wrecked my childhood, it took my parents away and the love we should have had as children.

I have seen and experienced a lot of abuse as a child that was the result of alcohol. I remember my Mother being battered many times, and the fear I felt. Too afraid to move, yet afraid that she would die from the injuries she received. My sexual abuse started then. There were many who took advantage of me while my parents drank. They had no idea what was happening to me. I was too afraid to tell, scared that when I was alone that I would be beaten. I was told that if I said anything to anyone I would pay for it, that there wasn't anyone to protect me, so I wasn't safe. The only way I survived was to pretend it wasn't happening when it did. I can remember all those cracks in the walls, where I took myself while it happened, dreaming that someday I'd never have to be here, crying and the feeling of being so dirty.

As a child I couldn't comprehend what was happening or why. I tried to be happy; however, I couldn't. I used to wonder why people would also say to me, "Why so sad, smile".

My abusers would come and visit my family. I would always feel so helpless. I would stay out of sight and hide. Everyone used to think I was shy. I wasn't, I was scared of these men. They way they looked at me was enough. I became a very angry and mean little girl, bitter towards everyone.

I didn't want to be close to anyone and didn't know how to behave towards friends and family. I lost all trust. My safe place was up in the big tree that stood behind our house. There I would watch for as far as I could see and wonder what it was like to be away from this place.

My physical and sexual abuse began when I was three years old and continued until I was 11 years old. I was sent away to residential school. To me, that was a blessing No longer did I have to put up with the abuse. I considered myself safe. Little did I realize that the effects would be with me for the next 25 years.

I used to be withdrawn from everyone and had a hard time to get involved in any kind of activity. I was still scared of people, especially boys and men. I was afraid to let anyone near me. If they came too close I would wonder what they wanted and why. I tried hard, however, I didn't know how to behave. I had too much fear in me.

I had a great deal of difficulty being in a relationship and never knew why. I began to think that it was a normal way to be, and everyone who lived like this had these kind of problems. I settled down and had three children, only to have my relationship end in bitterness. I became a battered wife. I was living a life that I had seen my mother live. The alcohol was back in my life; the man was an alcoholic. I experienced 12 years of emotional, mental, physical, spiritual abuse. I had very low self esteem and couldn't believe in myself, that I could ever be capable of doing anything good for myself. I tried running back home to my family, however I was turned away. They had an old belief "You made your bed, you sleep in it". I couldn't fit in again, after the years in residential school and leaving the reserve immediately after that. I would run into other relatives only to be found and abused again. I realized that nobody was ever going to help me, they were afraid to get involved. I felt alone and scared.

Finally, one day, I planned how I was going to leave. It was hard. I knew I wouldn't have the security of a home and would have to fend for myself. One thing I knew for sure was that the abuse would finally stop. It was tough for years. Eventually I went back to school and got what education I have today. In the years that followed I learned how to survive anything that came my way. The sad part about it was my children saw the abuse I went through.

Eventually, all of us went into therapy. It was there we learned to understand ourselves and walk through the pain and put it behind us.

If I had some wishes for myself and children, I would wish that I could have given them a better life and I would wish for them that they could have had a better father. I used to wish I came from a better family and that I never had to go through what I did. However, we all survived and that is what matters most of all today. We can have a better life, if we want to make it.

Today, we still have our problems. They're minor compared to what we came through. Now the children are on their own. I am a grandmother. After the long haul through therapy, I've learned to like myself and to be out-going. I've returned to my native traditional ways. It's helped me cope through my tough times. I carry my beliefs with me every day. I'm free to be myself. I can laugh, close my eyes and know I'm not going to be touched. I'm safe.

All those years I never knew that I was protecting my abusers, by not telling someone who cared. I allowed that man to abuse me, not knowing I could've gone to a shelter for battered women.

Today, I encourage women to seek help if they are being abused in any way, and children to tell if they're being sexually abused by anyone. I'm going to a therapy group for survivors of sexual abuse and have completed training as a drug/alcohol counsellor and sexual abuse facilitator for survivors groups. After going through all this, I always thank my creator. There's a reason why I survived. Someone cared enough to believe in me, the man that's in my life today.

Thank you, my friend, for letting me cry when I had to, for your strong shoulders, where I wept all my tears.

Thank you, my friend for helping me look inside of myself, for the strength I have. Thank you for bringing me to all the sweat lodges, knowing that I would find my willpower there, that it was there I would be close to our Creator, and our Mother Earth. For it was there I cried, and asked Creator to have pity on my prayers.

I thank Creator for bringing you into my life. It is through you, I have known the meaning of friendship, love and care.

Thank you, my friend, my love, my husband. There are no words, that can tell you how grateful I am to you, for all you have done for me.

— **Audrey G.**

Women's Right to Abortion

I think every woman should have the right to abortion. If women are denied the right it could result in child abuse, living in poverty, or severe deformity for the child.

Some women are not ready for a child. If they are forced to have one, they could end up resenting them for taking their freedom, the extra responsibility, and the costs of having a child. This can result in child abuse.

If a woman is not working, and doesn't have any special skills, she may not be able to support the baby. The cost of daycare is rising all the time. Mother and child would probably end up living in poverty.

If a woman has done drugs early in the pregnancy, the baby could be born with a limb or limbs missing. It could have brain damage. The baby could have Down's Syndrome and the child would be abnormal. It would be harder emotionally and financially.

Overall, I feel that if women are denied abortion it could result in more deaths of children and starvation. Children grow up with problems, because of not being wanted. It could also result in accidental deaths of women trying to give themselves abortion.

— Lynn R.

Action Read's Garlic Press published this book written by members of the women's group.

Taking space for woman-positive literacy work

Anne Moore
Action Read, Guelph, ON

I am a feminist who has worked for seven years in community-based literacy programs in southern Ontario. Last year I was hired to focus specifically on women, a first for me. I started the women's group for Action Read in March 1991. Its purpose was to create a women's group to focus on writing and to develop group skills among the women. I feel extremely lucky to be doing this work. What I did not expect was to see the resistance to women's programing. To my surprise I felt this resistance everywhere, including within myself.

In November, I became involved in an action research project with the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW), which gave me the time to document my experiences, to reflect on them and to share my reflections with women from eleven other programs across Canada. Since becoming involved in this project, two things have become strikingly clear. Woman-positive programing is essential in literacy programs. Women literacy workers doing this woman-specific programing need to be supported in their work by concrete structures and by opportunities to reflect with other women.

By beginning a dialogue with other women doing the same kinds of work I hope that I can lessen some of the isolation I feel in my work. This is a scary thing to do. The ideas in this paper are sometimes contradictory. I was reminded again while writing this of how complex women's experiences are and how we try to work with all these levels of complexity at once in literacy work.

After just a couple of months, my CCLOW journal entries started to alarm me. I saw myself being pulled between my job and my personal needs and often feeling snagged in between the two. I was trying to meet everyone's needs at once — and not meeting anyone's, especially my own. I began to ask questions. Why do I devalue my work? Why aren't there enough resources to do my work? Why don't I demand more? What was it I was trying to do and for whom? Why do I always underestimate the needs of women: my own, the group's and the staff's?

When I started the group for Action Read, my first challenge was to find a suitable location for the women's group. At the time, Action Read was on the fourth floor of a building where the "elevator man" was known to be abusive, especially to women who were poor. Complaints were made but nothing changed. I had no choice but to look for alternate space. With very little money, it was difficult to find a place. I finally heard of a community room in the basement of a

Action Read
Suite 206
20 Fountain St
Guelph, ON
N1H 3P2

housing complex for women. At this point Action Read moved to a large room in a busy, downtown storefront location. The group and the staff thought we should move to this new space even though it had no private area or effective sound barriers. Little did we know what effect our presence would have on the rest of the program. That is where my story begins.

Even when it began, the group just barely fit in the space we chose. However, we were aware that our conversations disrupted the staff and at times theirs disrupted us. The feelings were getting more tense when a woman with a seven-month-old baby appeared in the group one day, wanting to join. She had no permanent home, and was being threatened with having her child taken away both by her estranged husband and by Children's Aid. For her to take part in the group, the baby had to come too. Even though I couldn't imagine physically accommodating them, I decided that we must if we were to be a truly woman-positive project. I was also driven by my emotional need to do something for her and her baby. Little did I know when we took her in what an impact it would have on the group, the staff, and me.

Some group members resented the baby distracting them from their study and the staff found it impossible to get their work done while the group was going on; hearing the baby cry brought up some unwelcome emotions. I worked with the baby's mother to try to find a childcare arrangement that would please everyone, but it took a while. Meanwhile, baby or no baby, the group and the staff could not continue to work together jammed in the same small area. The space was too small for a women's group doing woman-positive programing because we were trying to create room for emotional needs, babies, etc. And there was nowhere else we could go. Would this have been different if it was a men's group?

Looking back, it seems like such a small request, four conflict-free hours a week — so why could we not manage to set aside four hours a week when the women's group could meet, without any conflict? We all underestimated the effect of the introduction of a women's group in the program. We are five women staff that either identify ourselves as feminists or are very sympathetic to the women's group. I didn't see until later how this project put current program practices into question.

Starting a woman-positive group meant inviting in six women's very complex lives and needs. As staff we did not have the contextual understanding and supports structured into our work that shelter workers might, which could have made this period a little easier. Maybe because of this, the space issues got translated into a conflict between staff which delayed our abilities to deal with the real issues at hand. We underestimated the power of starting a women's group and we needed some analysis to help us move through the issues that arose.

Over time, we did develop some ways of coping with the lack of space and the stress that women's personal stories were having on our work. We agreed that we needed to make a time after locking the doors at the end of the day to unwind so that we would not carry so much pain home — our own or other women's. Although we often had to leave at different times, it was a good attempt at acknowledging our needs. Some staff changed their schedules and tried to work at home during group hours. I realized I could not manage everything at once and asked another staff person to be around to assist me when extra needs came up in the group. She did this while trying to fulfil her own job demands; we had no funding for a second person to assist with the group.

As hard as it was for the staff, the cramped quarters also had a major impact on the group's development. At one point we thought about doing a play but postponed it because there wasn't enough room to move — a wave of the arm might knock into someone. I developed ways of helping women with their writing without getting out of my chair. Making things requiring materials was out of the question. Our physical space was just too limited. Our emotional space was limited as well. Confidentiality for women in the group was a joke at best. Male tutors and learners overheard many of our most intimate discussions. I had to cut conversations short because they were getting too intimate and I knew that others were listening in. Two women ended up leaving the group soon after this period. Although they have other reasons, I blame their departure in part on the cramped quarters and the inherent limitations.

With our limited funding, we could not provide a decent home for the women's group. As staff, we were caught in the middle and left blaming ourselves while trying to cope. The learners in the group were feeling the pressure as well. Here we were all women, all vying for space in an under-funded program, all trying to meet too many needs with too few resources. There was something a little too familiar about this picture — women living in a patriarchal society.

Funding limitations

The application for the women's project included funding to hire me and buy some materials for the group. It did not have adequate funds to rent a space for the group to meet in. The reason is obvious. We didn't expect to get enough in a grant to do all the work that is implied because we usually don't. In this case, space became the largest oversight and this had particular implications in terms of confidentiality and of being wheelchair accessible. Was this an oversight or were we just desperate to get any money at all and didn't want to be seen as asking for too much? I think that this devalued my work before I began.

My project application included the production and publication of a book. I think the book was included in the grant application to justify asking for so much money! I have seen myself and others do this many times before. Is it not enough to provide reading programs? By accepting so little and offering so much over the years we have taught our funders that it isn't enough to work with people in groups or individually. They need to see concrete evidence. We have to produce something. Or have they taught us? And how does the assumption that volunteers can deal adequately with adult learners contribute to devaluing our work?

No matter what the cause, I see that adult literacy work, particularly with women, isn't valued yet. There is no funding category for woman-positive programing anywhere. Women's funders don't fund literacy work. Literacy funders won't fund women's groups — except as special projects which can't get ongoing funding. Group funding is off limits because my group is considered to be special. Argh!

At the beginning of the second year of funding a government freeze threatened to stop the group. This money had been promised to us months before. The space question became a space crisis while I spent two months looking for alternate money while trying to keep the group going. I still got my pay cheque but nobody was funding the project for those two months. Without a word, the funding was reinstated. The funders were waiting for the national budget to be passed. Again, forces bigger than myself had me at their mercy. My overwhelming feeling is frustration.

Women and organizing for crisis

A significant number of the mothers who come to our program are chronically homeless, hungry, and engaged in a struggle to keep their children. I wish our program could accommodate this. I see how being woman-positive means recognizing that part of many women's experiences in this country is being poor and chronically in crisis. I have seen in the past that women can't learn to read while they are in crisis, but I felt how much women benefited from being in the group; learning and being part of something even when their lives were going through tremendous change. Women need a place where they are allowed to be — outside of all the roles of mother, wife or welfare applicant. The most valuable thing I could hope to do for women is to create a space where they could find community and non-judgemental support.

I see now how because of the lack of supports, we exclude women with children. Supporting mothers does not just mean babysitting money. It may mean a place to have the babysitting happen in case the woman is being threatened with having her baby taken away or if her home is unsafe (that is, if she has a home). Worry-free childcare. The only reason that women in crisis can work with us is because of their sheer determination to continue, not because we make it easy. This makes me feel ashamed.

Group dynamics

I became aware of how each group member brings with her a different special need. The greater the immediate needs, the greater the space she needs. In working with chronically ill women, homeless women, hungry women, in short, disadvantaged poor women, the spatial needs are great. For a woman in some sort of crisis, it is impossible to say let's deal with it after the group. Often, we are the woman's ongoing link with any agency. Most of our work was trying to help women get linked up with other organizations. My dream would be to have a counsellor on staff available all the time. In the meantime, I hope I have learned enough that I will have more supports in place for the next time.

Most of the women I am working with have never been in a group before. It takes time for the members to get used to each other, build some trust, and find the rules for themselves. Because of this, the group is always in a state of transition. This is another thing that makes my work unique.

In hindsight, I see how authentically the group went through the rougher moments in accommodating the difficulties that arose — especially around finding safe childcare for one of the members. We progressed not in spite of, but because of the difficulties. We have initiated new ways of dealing with conflict and with decision-making. One member made a puppet named Suzie who helps us vocalize our concerns in the group. Working through these difficulties together was central to making us grow and mature as a group. I have no regrets.

Women-only

The idea of women-only was foreign to the women in the group when I first spoke to them about the idea. At first, some found it silly to only allow women in the group. For the first year we had to review this idea over and over. I think they felt guilty for having their own space and enjoying it. Gradually I saw them take pride in the fact that the group was women-only. The humour changed, they used to joke about chasing men away. Now our big joke is that men couldn't handle listening to what we talk about — they might faint. I know that some of them experienced pressure from men because of the group. I ended up dealing with the anger of some of these men outside the group.

Learner-centred and woman-positive

Since I started doing the women's group, I have begun to question the learner-centred philosophy, with which I have been thoroughly indoctrinated in the literacy movement. I brought that philosophy with me when I planned to have a group that was women-only, woman-focused, and woman-positive. It never occurred to me that my conditioning and my intent might contradict each other. I think when you openly offer a women's agenda in a group, some women will feel uncomfortable or seem uninterested at first. From a learner-centred perspective, this might be a cue to change the subject, but I didn't always do this because I felt the woman-centred agenda was appropriate for the group. What surprised me was how much guilt I went through when I didn't always follow the wishes of certain individual women in the group.

For almost every topic we pursued there would be one woman who didn't want to participate. I would either ask her to bear with us or she would go off and do her own thing until we were finished. This worked until some women joined the group who only wanted to do math, even though they had been told this was a women's writing group. Before I knew it, all the women said they wanted to do math. I was very frustrated. It occurred to me that this might be happening because math is much easier, much safer, than talking and writing about women's issues.

I went through a lot of soul searching and finally divided the time in two. Every Monday was math day and every Wednesday was writing day. As it turned out, all the women showed up to every group. These women who had been adamant about math slowly got used to doing the writing.

This was their way of finding their own place in the group at their own pace. It left me wanting to find some new ways of integrating collective and individual approaches without seeing them as dualistic. In the short term I tended to balance these two forces by spending some time on both in each session — and by taking turns focusing on things they want and things I think they may be interested in. It would be nice if the literacy movement worked at integrating these forces into a philosophy since I see the learner-centred tradition causing problems all over. I would love to turn this into a dialogue with other literacy workers!

Feminism and resistance

I had to re-evaluate what feminism meant in this setting. I identify myself as a feminist and I wanted to openly explore this identification with women from different backgrounds. I discovered again what I already knew from years of work in the literacy field. Most of the marginalized women I work with have never had the opportunity or the privilege to explore who they are from within a political context. Or if they tried, it threatened the security they had found in their lives. These women knew only too well that it is often the men in their lives that stand between them and dependency on welfare. To question that might mean poverty or violence. Even if they were ready to define themselves differently, it was a long road before they might feel involved at some level. They did not see other options for themselves that were real enough to warrant taking major risks. I think feminism is very hard to identify with if you are not middle class and you don't live in a city.

In a session that took place during the Clarence Thomas hearings, I began to talk about sexual harassment. One woman burst out crying and said she didn't want to talk about that because it reminded her of being beaten. I changed the subject, and talked to her about counselling when the session was over. To my surprise she had already been hooked into various counselling opportunities around town and had dropped out because she either felt unaccepted or uncomfortable in those settings. Whether I liked it or not, the burden of her counselling needs rested with the group. We were very clear from the start that this was not a counselling group, but in reality it did work as a support and we were always bumping into someone's major issues.

Should I have pursued the discussion of sexual harassment despite her discomfort, knowing that the other women could benefit from the discussion? I began to wonder what my "feminist agenda" had to do with their lives.

For example, when the group started writing a play, we decided to focus on women through the last century. When we talked about the early decades, the women were very critical of women's situations. The closer they got to the present, however, the more they insisted that "everything is fine now. Women are equal." When we started to explore whether that was true, the strength of their anger over their own personal experience of violence scared them into wanting to change the subject of the play.

I don't think we can interpret these examples of women's resistance as their lack of strength or lack of feminist consciousness. I don't think we can blame me, or them, or other literacy workers. I think we have to talk about respecting where women are in their lives and what risks we can expect them to take, women students and women workers.

My respect for women's journeys has doubled in the last year. I will never underestimate the fear attached to identifying with women's issues. I no longer see women in terms of either being feminist or not. I see them as women who have had varying levels of privilege and safety which enabled them or stopped them from making choices in their lives or telling the truth about their lives.

We explored many of the basic notions of feminism. I found it very interesting that whenever I thought I was talking about feminism words like "patriarchy," "oppression" and even "feminism" would come up. I would have to search around to explain these words in more accessible language. At the end of some of these discussions it was very clear to me why these women didn't feel included. This was not their language.

I found it really difficult to find material with good content that was accessible to the group. I spent a lot of time trying, sometimes unsuccessfully, to adapt materials. Most materials assume a middle class upbringing, a university education and/or some history with the ideas. I realized I need more planning time to rewrite and adapt articles and ideas if I want to offer any real content. Not having the time to do this is a constant source of frustration to me. I am hopeful that some day there will be a large body of material to draw on. Next time I write an application for a women's group I will double the planning time.

Working in a crisis fog

Literacy work is shrouded by what I call "crisis fog." We are always reacting to a crisis and rarely creating a vision for the future. There always seems to be a good reason for the crisis, but it is determined to stop us from being able to do thoughtful and well planned work. In some cases we feed it, by not doing enough planning or something, but in most cases we are not responsible. I see how limited our power is and how we are made to feel that we are working on borrowed time. We are a field dominated by women who are often too grateful for any handout. I wonder how this could be different. I dream of five-year funding periods where we could really make plans for a change.

Luckily, the story does not end here. We were finally able to afford a second space, however temporarily. Since the group has moved, I am completely reinspired. Minimal interruptions and room to move! The new space has three small rooms with doors, one room is for a babysitter to sit with the kids, the other room is to work on the computer and there is a large space for the group. Doing the group no longer weighs on me like it used to. We can focus. We can stand up from the table and move around. We can practice the play in the same space we write it. I see the women taking more ownership now since they are no longer competing for air space. All this should be so basic, but for us it is luxury and we know we cannot sustain it for very long.

The group's future is in question. We may only have three months left of funding and again politics has stepped in the way. We will not know about funding for another month, we are told, because of the outcome of the referendum. If the funding does not come through, the staff may face temporary lay-offs to ease the financial strain. We could opt to save money immediately by cancelling the space we have found for the women's group, but we all look at each other grimly when it is even mentioned. It seems we would rather make a personal sacrifice in our salaries which we can't afford, than lose our space. Any solution is temporary since the scarcity of resources is a permanent fixture in the literacy movement especially when it comes to woman-specific programing.

Funding and space were the sources of resistance to the women's project that I expected to discover. I was authentically surprised when I started to see my own resistance.

Personal resistance

When I was left to hold somebody else's baby while facilitating the group, I felt resentful. Why not my own baby who I was missing and weaning? My breasts would ache when a group member's baby cried. Or when someone's babysitter didn't show up, and her child was left to crawl around our feet while we talked and all I could think about was the electrical sockets while I wanted to focus on the women themselves. I had to acknowledge my personal resistance to the demands the group made on me as a woman.

No matter how hard I tried to be a facilitator, I never stopped being a woman facilitator. There were times when I had to grapple with whether I could afford to stay with the job because my own childcare costs were eating up my salary. I went through a non-work related major personal crisis while all this was going on and there were many days when I had to channel all my energy into being present for the women in the group while I felt my own life was falling down around me. It was hard to listen to another painful situation to which there were no easy answers while I was trying to finish up so I could pick up my kid from the babysitter and remember to buy some food for dinner. Or when between the other demands in my work, I did not have time to prepare something for the group and it wasn't a particularly good session, I felt resentment. Some days it was all just too much. How could I keep putting out so much when my life was too demanding and my own needs were not being met?

Sometimes I got emotionally hooked by the women in the group. I heard myself getting too involved in solving a problem, and then realized later that I had gone too far. At times we acted too much like friends and I wished I had some professional facade to hide behind. But I was not just a facilitator — I was a woman facilitator.

We have had visits from other service providers who said to me afterwards, "I don't know how you do it." I can't help but think that they were feeling their professional mask being chipped away and were relieved to see the door. Working with the group is a constant reality check. It keeps me real in my work. I love it because of this. Some days I must admit I found myself wishing that this was a mixed group and we could just focus on content and move away from the emotional.

I saw myself floundering when I had to assert the need for space for the group. I am so used to working with few resources and devaluing my work because of it, that I didn't insist that "I need space to do my important work." Like many women I shy away from conflict and was afraid to ask the group for help or suggest that staff work at home while the group was going on or some such solution. Instead, I grumbled and complained and listened to others while they did the same but I did not move any closer to a solution. It was up to me to demonstrate how much I value my work when things got tough. We all put up with less benefits, salary, time, materials, and space than we need. Why is literacy work a woman-dominated field?

I think many of us chose to work in literacy because we wanted to work in an alternative educational environment with women, where there is no standard of formal training, and the work is not constrained by national professional associations. But I wonder how many of us feel insecure and unable to insist on the value of our work for those very same reasons? If we can't value our own needs as women workers, how can we authentically value the needs of the women in our program? This became clear when I realized that some group members were being obstructed from coming because of lack of space. Staff were used to putting up with the noise and inconvenience of lack of space and expected everyone else to. We would never expect to be given a classroom or confidential sound barriers to do our educational work like certified teachers. Yet, the learners are the ones who really take the brunt of it all.

Conclusion

While I do have many ongoing frustrations, I rediscovered in the last year and a half why I love this work. To my credit, and to the credit of all the women involved, despite a series of personal crises and this funding glitch, despite working with crying babies and frustrated staff, the group completed two books, launched with a little pizzazz.

I felt good as I watched the women's outlook change from disbelief to pride around the book project. We had an honourable mention in the House of Commons. One woman said that, "it was the best night of my life, but don't tell my husband." We laughed.

Some of the women in the group developed good friendships. I saw some women decide that, yes, it was OK to take some power in their lives and make some changes. This year, the whole group has decided to do a Wen Do women's self-defence course together. (Last year there were just three of us.) One woman asked to co-facilitate the group with me. Two of the women have become members on our Board of Directors and are active on many committees. Many of them do public speaking engagements on behalf of Action Read. And the group's plans are growing every day.

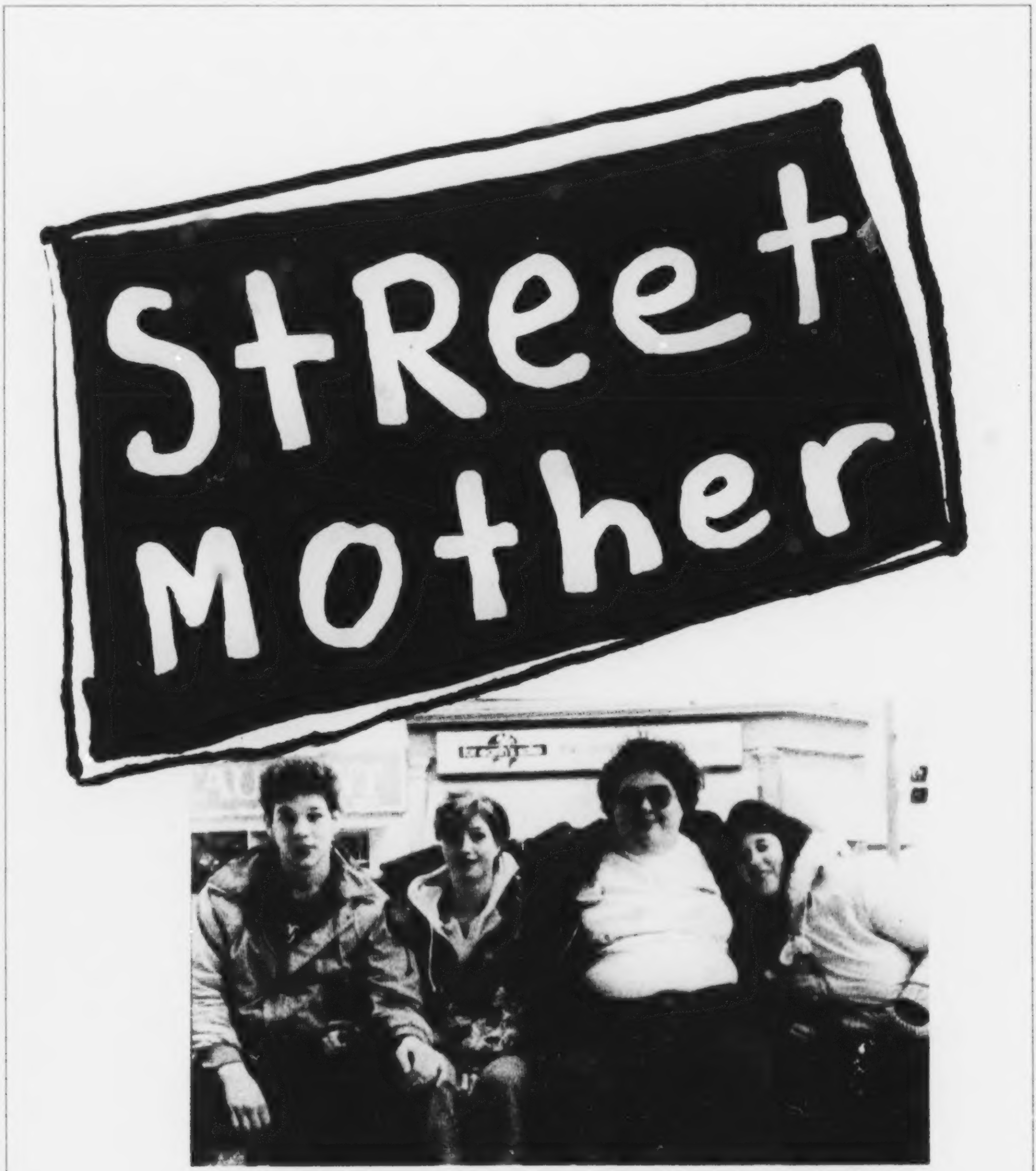
I have enjoyed the luxury of focusing on women in my work and of grappling with all these questions. I have learned a lot and plan to make changes based on what I learned to make the difficult transitions easier for everyone next time — funding permitting. I believe our program is one of very few that offer women a place where they can just be, feel good about themselves and maybe learn something. This has been a pretty inspiring time for me.

Being part of the CCLOW research project at the same time that I facilitated the women's group has been a really intense and rewarding experience. Without reflection and time to dialogue with other people doing the same work, I get isolated and stumble along blindly in my work without learning and without being able to make significant changes. I am determined to structure in more support for me after this research is over. (If I still have a group!)

I have dreams about the future. I imagine that our funders understand women's groups as necessary parts of literacy programs and that they give us enough money to run the groups with the resources we need to do this well. I imagine that I am working more closely with other women's organizations, that I don't feel abandoned in a literacy ghetto. I imagine a more open dialogue in the literacy movement about the ways in which women's issues relate to class and race, about how we might facilitate groups based on collective identifications. I imagine literacy workers valuing their work and demonstrating that in the grant applications we write. I imagine us — women learners and workers — not being so happy making do with so little. I imagine us demanding more. I imagine myself heeding my own words. . . .

Staff and members of Action Read would like to acknowledge the financial support of the Ontario Women's Directorate, National Literacy Secretariat, and the Ontario Ministry of Education. Anne Moore thanks the members of the women's group.

Action Read's Garlic Press published Street Mother by one of the members of the women's group.



Street Mother

As written and told
by Shirley Almack

Charting the woman-positive ripples — A journal of discovery

Karen Bergman-Illnik
Arctic College, Arviat, NWT

I wrote a journal for seven months as part of my participation in a program-based action research project sponsored by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat. With women from twelve other programs across the country I agreed to reflect on and document my experience based on the following research question: What happens when some women in an adult literacy program decide to do something they consider woman-positive?

I had taught the Women's Upgrading Program at the Arctic College Learning Centre the previous two years and would be teaching again in the 1992 January to April term. Besides writing the journal, which I sent off to Betty-Ann Lloyd (a coordinating researcher) every two or three weeks, I attended three national workshops with the women from the other programs, and I met with Betty-Ann twice. During these visits, we had taped conversations about my experience during the research.

The sections of my journal included here tell one story of what I discovered both in myself and in the women's upgrading class. Some names and details have been changed.

November 16, 1991

My story started a couple of years ago. Lynn Fogwill, a friend and literacy worker from Yellowknife, asked the Learning Centre if we wanted the Arviat Women's Upgrading Program included in a national research project. We agreed and Lynn soon called to say a researcher would be up to see us in the fall of 1990. Of course, we didn't know what to expect — or rather, we expected the stereotypical researcher to show-up.

Betty-Ann Lloyd came and fit into our activities and lives as if she was a long lost sister come home for a visit. She sat and listened and talked to whomever invited her to talk. She made few assumptions about us (that we knew about) and was content to drink tea in the fading sunlight of autumn. Was she really researching? She must have been because a while later came the first draft of Discovering the strength of our voices, the report outlining the exploratory phase of this research.

A while later something came from CCLOW saying it was time to put names forward for the second phase. We called right away. I called for lots of reasons. Joy

Karen
Bergman-Illnik
635 Anson
Drive
Yellowknife,
NWT
X1A 2X5

Suluk, my boss, said, "Yes, of course we should call." I do research in other areas and am always looking for new and better ways to do it. I knew I could learn a lot from this project.

I wanted to be with other women who experienced and cared about the same things I did. I wanted to feel less alone. I wanted to grow and to take that growth back to my work with other women. I figured the Women's Upgrading Program at Arctic College could benefit from the stronger tie to CCLOW and vice-versa.

Life slipped and bumped along until all of a sudden it was time to get ready for the first national meeting of women from the twelve programs in the research. The calls to actually arrange air travel, expense money, etc., started. Then the airplane tickets arrived and stayed tucked away until it was time to pack.

I could say lots about the first national meeting — some feelings, lots of analysis, my own visions for the future of this research. I'm excited about the experiment of doing projects with the women and the experiment of researching that experience. I'm excited about the community development it will encourage. And I can't wait to start sharing our project and the national project with the wise women in my day-to-day life back in Arviat.

January 24, 1992

I went to the regular Friday staff meeting at the Learning Centre today, feeling good that I would see the other staff and update them on the women and literacy research project.

I launched into a summary of the background, purpose, and approach of the project. I made it clear I'd be keeping a journal as part of my work in the research, and I'd try to record the effects of the Women's Upgrading Program on the learners, the Centre, the community, and myself.

One instructor asked a few questions in what I perceived to be a skeptical manner. However, she's clearly stated her lack of empathy/sympathy/understanding for anything she labels "feminist." The other instructors didn't say too much about the project and seemed neutral or disinterested. When someone asked if "that was all on that topic," I realized the whole response was not what I'd expected.

My real feelings didn't surface until after I'd finished with my next meeting and was walking home. I felt disappointed, let down, and a little stunned. I mulled over how my role with the Women's Upgrading Program might change, and how the changes might affect the research project. I knew for sure I'd be much more on my own than I'd anticipated.

January 28, 1992

I went to the Learning Centre for the first night of classes. No one showed. I sat there in an empty, quiet building wondering "What now?" I thought if women weren't coming to the Centre then how could the learning be taken to them? Where were they, and what were they doing? I felt safe in assuming there were women who still wanted the wonderful, growing experience of the Women's Upgrading Program. I knew I still wanted that experience!

[Here Karen tells the story about discovering the word "dyke" used by someone in reference to this research and to her involvement in it. In a short story, DIS/COVER, she worked with the many levels of her response — and the consequences of that response for her work at the Centre and her life in the community. As part of the research process, Karen shared that story with Joy Suluk. After they had two difficult but open and respectful conversations Karen decided not to include that story as documentation of this research. We have removed direct references to the incident from this journal.

A description of what happened for Karen and her class during the time of the research is included in The power of woman-positive literacy work. Some of the conversation between Karen and Joy is recorded there.]

I left a note for Joy saying we should get together and talk.

February 3, 1992 (daytime)

I talked with Joy on the phone. She had the names of five women who said they'd come. All but one had been in the program before. One of them has come to the program every year since it started.

When I looked over the list of names I realized that each of the returning learners was either working at least part-time or in programs at the Learning Centre. Was this "progress" in their lives? Was it at least in part attributable to the Women's Upgrading Program and Learning Centre? How the heck will we ever know?

February 3, 1992 (evening)

I arrived at class a little after 7:00 because my babysitter was late! The women were sitting at or near the computers when I walked in. A tide of happiness swelled up in me.

I suggested we put on the coffee and sit around the kitchen table. We talked for about forty-five minutes about what we wanted to do in the program. I'm used to long silences when finding out from learners what they see themselves doing here. Well, it was clear that was not to be the case tonight — I had to keep asking them to speak one at a time! They had lots of ideas about what they wanted to do. Much of it we'd done previous years, but there were a couple of new suggestions:

- We'll visit organizations and workplaces instead of inviting them to come to the class. We figured most of us would be able to do it once a week during the day. Those who are babysitting could bring the child with them. We'd try to plan around Debbie's four-hour-a-day work schedule and figured Gloria might be able to get out of her Job Entry program to make the visits with us. Some places to go: Northern Store, Drug and Alcohol Centre, library, post office, churches, RCMP, by-law officers, Social Services, Renewable Resources.

- Visit elders to talk, keep them company, make tea.
- Invite some guests such as nurses and women from the homecare program.
- Play games — cards, maybe crib.
- I suggested we could do something like the "All My Cookies" baking project that we did last year. There seemed to be no objection. Someone suggested we take the baking to elders when we go to visit.

I have the sense we'll be taking our class out into the community more this year and that feels like a natural development.

February 8, 1992

A staff person asked me if I felt the Women's Program was under pressure because of the research project. I was surprised at first because that hadn't entered my mind. I thought about it and told her I didn't feel any pressure because the developments in the program (such as branching out into the community and spending more time on projects) were already evolving before the research project came around. I also told her I saw the research project as a support for me and the program.

It was a good question — I'd be concerned if the program was driven by the research.

February 19, 1992

Every learner is keen on homework this year, which is a change from previous years. I've been photocopying sections out of workbooks in the College's resource library. The advantages are that the rate of academic learning will (should) increase; it prepares learners for the demands of full-time upgrading; it provides a connection to the Women's Upgrading Program between classes; learners have trouble retaining new skills learned on the computer-assisted learning program and homework helps long-term retention.

The problems with homework have been: the women forget it at home; there's not always support outside of class if they don't know how to do the homework; I sometimes struggle to find out what's appropriate homework for them; we have to find time to review and correct it; I have to keep track of who's doing what.

The nature of the Women's Upgrading Program is that the women make choices over as many aspects as possible of the program and their involvement in it. Allowing and encouraging the same freedom of choice over homework creates some difficulties. I hear myself sounding more "teacherish" when dealing with the homework side of the program. I don't feel real comfortable with that, but I know some more discipline is necessary for the homework to be effective.

The program this year definitely doesn't have the spontaneity it has had in past years. I'm not sure how to evaluate that yet. I guess I'll see how it goes for a while more.

March 4, 1992

I found out today that Kate, a former Women's Upgrading Program regular, hadn't been to work for nine days. I had been tutoring her in her workplace every Monday and Wednesday afternoon when she's just starting or ending her shift. I think it's great that her boss has agreed to pay her an extra two hours a week so she can continue her connection with the Centre.

Later the same day

I ran into Kate at the arena and we talked. Her boy had a medical emergency and had to be medi-vaced to Churchill then later to Winnipeg. Kate's husband went with him so Kate didn't have a babysitter for her pre-school children. That's why she couldn't work. Also, she was very upset about her boy and I wondered what it would be like to be in such a position with the medical establishment — not understanding, not asking, not knowing, worrying, waiting.

I worked with both her boss and her about being absent, about not calling, about babysitting possibilities. I don't know if it's been resolved and I don't feel responsible for making it work out. I do think it is relevant to the research project because it's an example of how the program reaches out into the community. In this case it's with a woman who was in the program the past two years but isn't this year because she's now working.

It's also an example of the how the relationships developed in the program extend beyond the program both in time and physical location. It's an example of the changing needs of a woman who has been a regular in the program and has expanded her role in the community. In Kate's case, she's now a worker and needs lots of support and education about employment. (Her boss needs support and education, too!) And it's an example of how important it is for the Centre to criss-cross programs to support learners. In this case, a former Women's Upgrading Program learner became a workplace literacy learner.

Another chapter of Kate's story came to light one day during a tutoring session. She has a friend who's talking to her about past abuse. Kate said she felt helpless and inadequate to deal with her. She asked what to do. So we talked about how to be a helper. It struck me how Kate had become a support to other women and, in the process, gives back the support she'd been given in the Women's Upgrading Program.

This is a BIG ripple of the program. Does it count that the ripple was formed by actions two years ago?

Even later the same day

Two new women joined tonight. They're friends of women in the program. Very heartening.

We talked again about getting together for our scheduled visit to the drug and alcohol centre. These events are proving to be more difficult to arrange than I'd anticipated. Afternoons are no good because everyone watches "Guiding

Light" from 2:00-3:00. The child one woman babysits naps from 2:00-4:00. We agreed to try for 10:30-11:30.

I talked with Betty-Ann on the phone today. Unloaded some of the difficult feelings, thoughts. Felt a weight lifted. What is so magical about talking with someone who understands, with whom there's no need to explain so much? Got a fax from her, too, with lots of significant (to me) supportive comments.

March 5, 1992

I went to another staff meeting at the Learning Centre and told them about the second CCLOW workshop in April. I said that it's important to me that there's more support here. I want someone else to know what it's all about, to be involved with what's going on. There was very little discussion. I said my first preference would be Joy. Ellen again brought up the idea of a learner as the second person. I agree in principle but can't think of anyone appropriate in this situation. Joy and I will talk about it later

March 7, 1992

I had Ellen over for a Saturday afternoon tea. I brought up the CCLOW workshop in April so we could discuss who would be a good candidate for the second person. We talked about Ellen's suggestion that it should be a learner. Again, I said I support that in principle but couldn't think of an actual person in this situation. There's no translation at these meetings and the discussion is not at an appropriate level for any learners I can think of. They would have to be able to not only reflect and analyze, but also be able to articulate thoughts and feelings in a second language. And do it for days on end! I can hardly cope with all the sitting, listening, and talking, and English is my first language!

March 9, 1992

While everyone was working on the computers I sat at the kitchen table and corrected homework. One of the women came over and started talking. Our conversation turned to child and wife abuse — both physical and economic. She said she needed this talk and left at 8:30 to be home with her mom.

Later during the class I talked with another woman about her problems — wide ranging and difficult, but we explored possibilities. I agreed to talk with a social worker and got her permission to tell him everything she told me.

I've seen again tonight how women get support for themselves despite overwhelming odds. One way is through this Women's Upgading Program. The pattern is becoming predictable — I've seen it over the past three years. I know the routine, they don't. While I'm happy for them/us and I feel the warm strength in their voices despite some horrible things in their lives, I don't feel the extreme pulls of hope and despair I've felt before when women disclose their lives to me. At first I felt tingly with rage and sadness, as if it was my story they were telling. (And in some ways it is.) And I used to feel such soaring hope that things were really changing — albeit slowly. They were speaking out!

This year their stories are stories I've heard before. (Do I sound jaded? Am I?) I have the willingness to help, but I am not driven by extreme feelings. I know the dance, the moves. They don't.

This is another change in me.

March 10, 1992

It's satisfying to be able to hook up women in the program with help in the community. One successful "moving out into the community." It's not the kind of moving out I visualized at the beginning of the research but I realize it counts — spinning strands for our web. I want to point out that this kind of moving out is not entirely new for the program or the college; documenting it is. I'm much more self-conscious and aware of what I do, think, feel regarding the Women's Upgrading Program.

This research asks me to document what happens because of the project. It's like the research is a stone thrown into a pond and I'm supposed to describe the ripples caused by the throwing in of the stone. But I'm partly thrower, partly stone, partly pond, partly ripple, as well as observer! Sometimes I question if the ripples I see are the ones created by me looking around for the ripples which matter. These ripples are inside me. Some things I want to talk about regarding this research: tell me how to stand/posture in the pond; tell me how to know which ripples are which.

March 11, 1992

I went to see the Social Worker with my student today. (I'd been to see him alone earlier in the week, as planned in class.) I went as her support, not her voice. Things were pretty much as I expected. The worker used some words and jargon I think she didn't understand. He seemed to rush the pace a bit and I think I heard a mental "Whoa!" from her. But the main thing is that he was supportive and we'll get some action from him. One of my sons was in the waiting area of the Social Services office waiting for me after school as we'd arranged. When I came out he wanted to know what I was doing. I told him I couldn't say too much because it was someone else's private business, but I told him that some men were bullying and abusing a woman because they knew she was weaker. I said I wanted him to know from this that it's for us to use our power and stand up with people who are weaker against those who abuse them. And so the ripples caress my son.

March 19, 1992

Last night at class it seemed like some things were beginning to fit together.

One of the new students is becoming much more at ease with me. She's a nice person — just sort of a good feeling I have when she's around. I like it when she comes. She'll speak more English to me now and ask questions. At first, she'd ask the other learners in Inuktitut in front of me. A few times I answered her. I knew she was surprised I understood but too polite to show it. I try to say things in Inuktitut to her.

At break time, everyone came and sat around the kitchen table where I was finishing marking the homework. Usually they've been going outside for a smoke. Someone picked the Canadian Living magazine from the rack beside us. It featured a great-looking chocolate banana cake on the cover. We almost ate it up with our eyes. I said "We should make it. Let's look it up." They all jumped aboard.

Eventually we found the page with the chocolate banana cake recipe, after prolonged discussion on several other pages with great-looking food. We made copies of the recipe and started to read it. The recipe was not a basic white cake format at all. It called for exotic things like white chocolate and cooking terms I can't even remember the names for today. But in poring over the recipe we talked about what sour cream, whipping cream, and baker's chocolate are. We discussed "place with cut side down." One of the women explained what that meant and demonstrated with a pretend cake. I demonstrated how you could produce the chopped chocolate using an ulu (women's knife). They found that funny — but I don't know why. We delved into other tidbits of cooking lingo, then decided it wasn't really our kind of recipe anyways. Besides, it was smoke time.

Plans for the dance the learners wanted to organize came together. One woman called the principal to get the gym and things rolled along after that. We spent the last half of the class deciding the details and making posters.

I don't know if this is significant to the research or not. We had trouble with the computer program we needed to make the posters. A male student from the daytime upgrading was there working on his own and offered to help. It became a collaborative effort. When the posters were done and we were in the other room photocopying, two of the women pointed out some things on the poster they weren't really happy about. Today I wonder why they didn't say anything to the male student when he was doing it. I'm certain they would have told me or each other had it been one of us in control of the keyboard. Was it because he was outside the class, or was it because he's a man? What kind of relationships or connections are there between him and any or all of them? Maybe I'm going too far with this?

March 23, 1992

Betty-Ann and I met in Winnipeg to talk about the research. We decided she wouldn't come to Arviat because of the voyeurism that happens when white people fly in from the south to "research" the residents. Neither of us were feeling comfortable about her coming to Arviat, but neither of us said anything for a long time. Then, when she mentioned her concern, I felt relieved.

We did the first interview and I made a few notes while talking with her. I'm especially wondering why the research is so hard to talk about with co-workers and friends at home in Arviat. Maybe it's because there is no language and context for it — or that language and context is hard for me to find. Maybe it's because talking about things makes them more visible. Maybe it's too hard for me to overcome traditional and cultural beliefs that dominate in the community. Maybe I just don't know enough about the research.

I went to class tonight a few hours after arriving home from Winnipeg. Joy was at the Centre and came into the small room I was working in. I told her the weekend meeting went well and I feel much clearer on what the research is and how it's going. I was conscious of feeling a little "pushy" about the topic, but also pressed by the fact that I want to "do" the research — I'm curious about the questions. I talked about what I wanted to do with the staff, to get their reactions/ input and she said it sounded fine.

We talked about how the Centre was already doing something especially for women to help them improve their literacy skills, by offering the Women's Upgrading Program.

For the first two years any woman who signed up for evening classes got channeled into the Women's Upgrading Program. That was not necessarily woman-positive. A men's evening program ran at the exact same time as the women's and they worked more intensely at getting ready for GED tests. It would have been more "positive" for women to let them choose which program they wanted.

The class decided to bake during the next week, then take the baking when we visit a few elders. A few people planned to bring cooking books next week so we could plan what to make.

March 25, 1992

After computer time, checking homework, and coffee break we sat around a table in the small workroom and began looking for recipes. The GED students had taken over the kitchen table — our usual meeting place. The talk about recipes made us cozy.

I found more cookbooks in the instructor's resource library and, with them, two copies of Our Bodies, Ourselves. I put them on the table and one woman said, "Oh, those are like . . . dirty books." Eventually another woman picked one up. She commented on one page with photos of live births. The conversation took off from there. We talked about our own birth experiences. A woman who is usually shy surprised me with her openness and leading role in discussing the book.

The conversation flowed naturally as we flipped through the book, looking at pictures and talking about everything from IUDs to STDs. The section about how our bodies look inside was quite interesting. The drawings of the male anatomy caused lots of laughter, especially the erect penis. I don't think the laughter was out of nervousness alone. I just remember how much they laughed at that part.

At the end I suggested we ask a nurse to class next week to talk more about our bodies and ourselves. They agreed.

March 27, 1992

Last week when the women and I talked about recipes and sexuality, we also ended up talking about other Arctic College programs. We discussed why some students get paid (sponsored) to go to school. I assumed they knew more about this kind of stuff. Anyway, they ended up saying what they wanted to do. One woman said she was going to try to go to school full-time next year as a sponsored student because it would be better than cleaning for other people and babysitting. Another said she was going to apply to go to school full-time, too. When she finishes she's going to "head straight to the Northern store" and apply to be a stock clerk. These are the most detailed descriptions about personal goals or plans that I've heard in three years. Clearly, asking them the question point blank doesn't work. I've tried to think of better "asking" techniques, but maybe I should be developing better "listening" techniques.

April 1, 1992

We had a nurse from the Health Centre in to talk to us more about bodies, birth control, etc. She included the structure and function of men's and women's bodies; differences in sexual arousal between men and women; contraceptives (pill, IUD, foam, condom); sexually-transmitted diseases; the need for PAP smears.

The topic of birth raised an issue for one student. She's unable to have babies and didn't want to participate in the class at first. Eventually she moved closer to the front. Once, when she moved up to look at something on the table, I heard her say, "Why am I looking? I can't have babies." The nurse asked her why and she said the doctor didn't tell her why. The nurse said that "ticked her off" and she could come to the Health Centre where they would look over her chart. The student had tears in her eyes and by the end of the class both she and another student had arranged to go to the Health Centre on Friday afternoon.

The nurse, a woman about my mother's age, did a good presentation on a topic which can be very difficult. She looked totally at ease demonstrating proper use of condoms on her fingers. I tried to picture my own mother putting condoms on her fingers! Her apparent ease put us all at ease, but she did sound patronizing at times — telling the women they "should" do this or it would be "good" for them if they'd just do that. How can people make those statements when they know very little about these women's lives? Then I think the nurse probably knows a side of things I couldn't even imagine.

A couple examples of things she said that made me uncomfortable: "Don't have a baby every year. Wait two years." "If a guy wants to have sex and you don't, say 'No'." Also, she wasn't going to bring up the possible problems of the IUD until I asked. I feel uncomfortable not sharing all the information I have in a two-way exchange, especially when I know the people I'm with don't have the same power or resources I have.

At certain points I saw great opportunities for discussion, reflection, and drawing on all our experiences. To be fair, of course, she wasn't there for that. I'm only going into this because I was struck by the idea that there are probably very real differences between women who work with other women depending on the field or role we're in. The nurse and I could both be seen to be doing "woman-positive" work, but because of our roles (me in literacy, her in health) we have grown accustomed to very different approaches. Then, too, she trained and practices in a profession dominated by male doctors. But in the end, we're both trying to help women.

April 2, 1992

I talked on the phone with a neighbour. I told her about what happened in class last night with the nurse, and the young men abusing single women. I was getting more inflamed as I talked and aware that I didn't want to appear too — whatever. Somehow the word feminist came up and I said how I never thought of myself as one until someone else started calling me that. I was quite surprised when my neighbour said she's never thought of me as a feminist. So then we talked about our understanding of the word. We found we have a lot of the same views about women and agreed that we are treated in unfair ways just because we are women.

We talked a bit about how some women appear to be strong supporters of women in the work they do, but in their own marriages they appear to be dominated and subservient. I hadn't been able to put it together before, but I realized how many women I know who work very hard to empower other women, but they are controlled by men in their personal lives. It's as if these publicly strong women are too afraid to change their own lives so they work on others' lives. I didn't tell her sometimes I feel like one of those women.

In amongst all this talk I talked about the research and how it's looking at the women who work with women learners — not necessarily the learners themselves. I could have hugged her when she said, "Oh, that sounds interesting." We had to cut our talk short because it was almost lunch time — the story of our lives. But I was just at the point of realizing how befuddled I was by how differently people understand feminism and how that shapes their reactions and actions to people. There's something here just eluding my grasp. I can't even get the question right.

Here's me just being me.

On one side Ellen is gently chiding me for being feminist and I feel almost obligated not to let her down, while carefully avoiding whatever degree of strident fervour might offend her. On the other side is Val, whom I'm also trying not to alienate or carry against her will into foreign waters.

And, I'm trying to stay within these imaginary lines without even knowing how the lines are defined in their minds and, sometimes, in my own mind. When Val finally reveals her hand, I realized I assumed a lot of things that weren't even true. If this is happening amongst only three women, the complexities amongst all women is too overwhelming to consider! Has the word feminist created half the battle?

April 6, 1992

We did some more baking tonight and talked about visiting elders next week to visit and distribute the goodies. We'll do it on Tuesday afternoon. There's no use trying to set up times as we'll have to work around the elders who aren't likely to stick to a scheduled time.

We also decided tonight that Wednesday, April 15 would be our last class. The evenings are getting too light and mild with spring coming. I'm finding it very difficult to go to class. Rather than let the class die, I think it'll be better to end it now.

April 8, 1992

We finished baking tonight. We went over our plans for the next week which involve quite a few events outside of class — visiting elders, shopping for our end of year party, and the wind-up party for the whole Learning Centre.

This last week I've thought about what I want to say about me as a white woman working with aboriginal women.

First, it's important to differentiate between my situation and, say, a white instructor with Black or aboriginal women in southern Canada. In Arviat, I'm part of a five per cent minority in the community and part of the minority in the whole NWT. The women I work with are from here. Period. Their ancestors for thousands of years are from here. They use their language every day.

I am, though, part of the culture which dominates in many ways, even though it's a minority. I do have more access to a power base many of the women in the class don't have yet. I have access to resources they don't. On the other hand, they have access to power and resources unavailable to me.

Second, I realize what I get out of the Women's Upgrading Program is a means of connecting to the community and to women's lives in a situation where people are divided, to varying degrees, according to race. I get to know about the people around me and learn about life. At times I feel like I get more out of the program than the ones who are supposed to be the learners.

This hit home last week when I was on the phone to my neighbour. As we talked, a few things that are going on in the community came out. I realized that I wouldn't know about these things if it weren't for the program. I don't really know that I'm learning until someone or something asks me to reflect.

I don't know if it's the media or me that's changing, but lately everything I read or hear on the radio is about feminism.

May 1, 1992

I was shocked this morning when I looked back and saw my last journal entry was three weeks ago. It's taking me quite a bit of time this morning to get back into the stream of writing this journal. I look at the book where I usually keep a quick penciled record of what happened in class, and thoughts, feelings. discussions I've had in the past few days. Oh no, it's virtually blank since April 8!

Another student finished the decimal section in the computer-assisted learning program. This may be a new record for the Women's Upgrading Program. In my notebook, there's an exclamation mark after this fact.

On the same night, we planned to take the baking around to elders the next day. We were to meet at the Centre at 2:00. Only one student showed and we decided to distribute the baking to any women in the immediate area! That included women who happened to be in the Centre at the moment. We made a little presentation, including references to how great we woman are!

We brought a Polaroid camera on our visits and took pictures of each connection. We gave a picture to each woman and took one back to the Centre where it'll be put into the Centre's yearbook. I wrote the captions on right away so that information wouldn't be lost.

On April 15, we held our end-of-the-year wrap-up. Three women brought other women guests. One woman brought her nephew because she was babysitting. I didn't bring anybody because I was too busy to think about it until the last minute, then every woman I could think of to ask was busy. We'd bought the groceries and a few prizes for games the week before. We arrived a bit early at the Centre to get things ready. We planned to have salad, pizza, hotdogs, and our left-over baking.

The wrap-up seemed to end on a flat note. We presented the certificates, we took pictures, etc. But it all sounded blah, blah, blah to me. Afterwards we walked home in our different directions. I realize that I missed the stimulation of a close staff this year. The program ends this year with me feeling like I left "things undone."

I realize that although the stimulation didn't come directly through the Women's Upgrading Program this year, it came through the CCLOW research. It's been very personal growth, as in other years, but not from the same source or in the same circumstances. And it wasn't a shared growth with the learners or the staff. The people I feel I'm sharing it with are far away. It's different and OK in its own way.

Epilogue

The research project will be over in about a month. When I read my journal and think about what happened in my part in the research I see several things. First, I realize how much of a personal journey it was. I discovered many new things for myself. My understanding of myself and my work with women deepened or changed. I connected with a community of women in the research project where I could more safely discuss the questions in my head. At the same time as that connecting came a kind of separation from some of the women and support systems in my day-to-day life. The connecting and support for me in the Women's Upgrading Program with the learners, however, stayed about the same as it has been in other years.

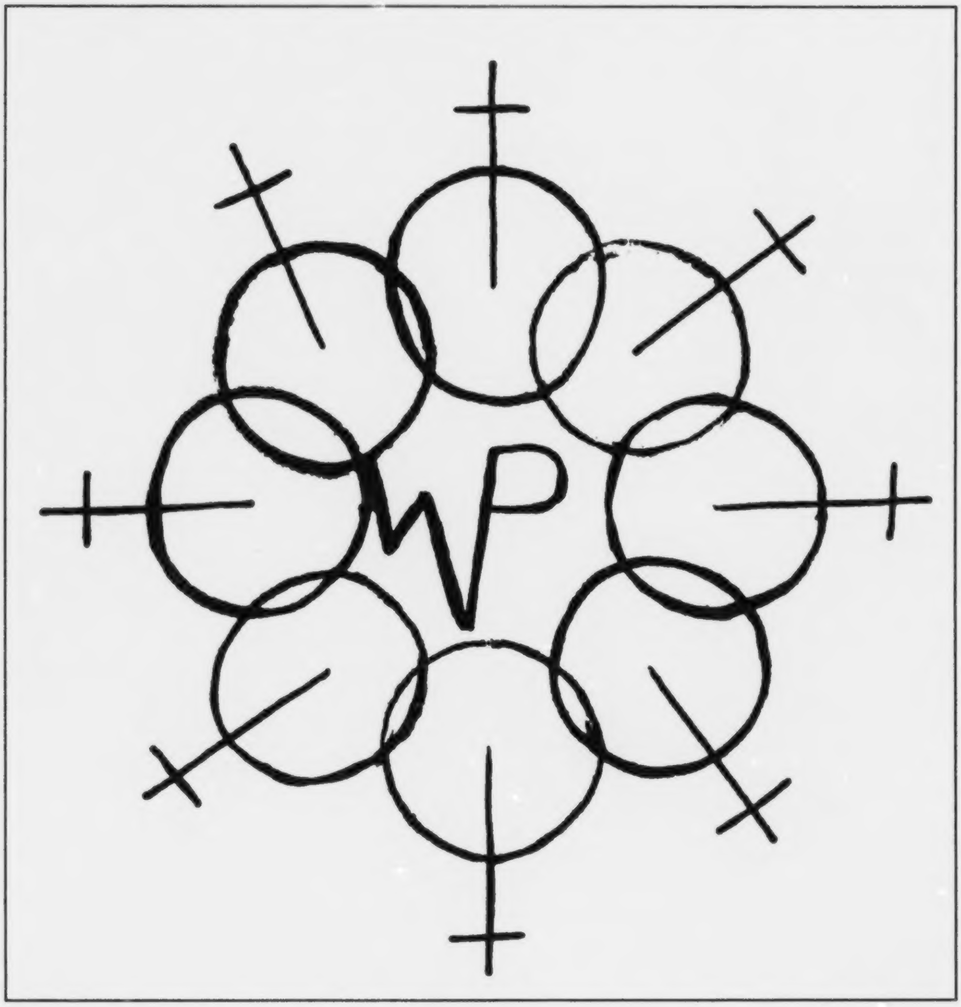
Second, I see myself differently and I think other people in my day-to-day life see me differently. I wonder if they know, or ever knew, who I am. I feel like my identity has shifted, has come more under question from within myself and from other people. I realize I want to be where I don't have to guard or protect myself so much from possible misunderstanding. I also realize I want to be where there is less silence about questions.

Third, I'm less willing to take political action. I used to be much more willing to organize public activities, meetings, try to form groups to address issues. Perhaps it's temporary but I have drawn away from any group involvement. I remain committed to take political action for myself, my children, or individual women, and am getting ready to make some changes for myself. Perhaps I need to empower myself more before I continue to advocate other women taking power for themselves. Perhaps I'm not willing to pay the price of public political action any more.

My personal ending to the research project involves as many difficult questions for me as it has provided new information and possible answers.

Part of my journey continues to be with the women in the program and telling the truth about our lives in our own language our own way. In particular, I think of women who've been with the program for four years and have become close friends. By paying closer attention to them in the journal I see how they are now taking personal action in their own lives and supporting other women the same way they get support in the program. It's like they create ripples of their own that caress people around them.

Pine Grove logo representing woman-positive activity.
Idea and drawing by Emma and Jocelyn, Pine Grove.
Meaning: All colors (races) of women joined together doing an activity that is woman-positive.



The statement that begins on this page appears in front of each resource booklet. Then there is a short piece written by the woman who developed that particular booklet. In this collection, we have included all the pieces written by the women and a sample Table of Contents from one of the booklets.

Resource Booklets
Pine Grove Correctional Centre, Prince Albert, SK

We know that people do not have to experience something before they can learn. For example, not everyone has to burn themselves before they stay away from something hot. It's helpful for another person to tell us, "Don't touch that or you'll get burned!" So, too, when someone becomes hurt another can say, "When that happened to me, I did thus and thus."

We can benefit from others' experiences.

By women sharing their own experiences and how they themselves were or were not able to deal with them, we can learn. We can learn as individuals and as society by listening to women who have suffered and who are healing.

We would like to express our appreciation to CCLOW (Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women). We developed these resource booklets as part of our participation in an action research project sponsored by CCLOW and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat. With eleven other adult literacy, basic education and academic upgrading programs from across Canada, we explored what happens when some women in a program decide to do something woman-positive. These booklets are what we decided to do.

Our appreciation also goes out to Pine Grove Correctional Centre in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan for encouraging a woman-positive activity as part of their philosophy.

Please feel free to photocopy any booklet for your benefit.

Pine Grove
Correctional
Centre
Box 3003
Prince Albert,
SK
S6V 7J3

Priscilla:
In the making of this resource book, I think back to the times I found myself in a new, strange city, not knowing where to reach for help when I most needed it. I hope this book will be of some use to others who find themselves in similar situations.

Phyllis:
I wasn't too crazy about doing these booklets at first, and am still not crazy about them, but I understand where there could be a need for them. I guess if it helps someone to accomplish something, to help themselves, or to help someone else, then I could help. (My good deed for the day!) It's not that I don't like helping people. I guess it's just that I never thought of a need for one because it was never there for me. (The booklet) It does feel good knowing it might help someone.

Emma:
My hope for this resource book is to enable other women to know where to turn in times of need and/or where to reach when other difficulties may arise in your everyday lives.

Sometimes our problems may need a professional's point of view or maybe just a little helping hand from someone who knows and cares. There are so many resourceful people ready to help.

Jocelyn:
This booklet is your way out to a newer and better life. The resources which you read about will open new doors, help you and your family to get to understand and cope with most of your daily problems. Please take the time to go through this book and you'll see that what I said is true. These decisions will be the first and hardest things which you might have to make. But in the long run, you'll start to see the happiness in all that life can offer.

Thank you for taking the time to hear me. If you decide to follow through with your plans and goals, I'm very happy to tell you that you've made the right move to a better and wonderful life.

May the Great Spirit watch over you as long as the grass grows and the water flows! . . . . All my relations.

In writing this resource book I have learned and understood that I was never alone out in society. I came to a point where I had nowhere to go, no one to ask for help, no one to listen to and too scared even to try. Now that I know of these places, I have the tendency to go out and help people, people who are in need of help.

I used to hear of these places but I was too shy or too proud to even think of going to them. I am an Indian woman who grew up in a white society. Today I look back and understand where I have gone wrong. In my heart and in my mind I was always seeking for someone or someplace. I was hurting so much I turned my life to the streets. There was alcohol, drugs, glamour, excitement and there was also a lot of other people the same colour as me. For eight years I lived the life of HELL. I had gone through a lot of bad experiences. I am very proud to be here today to tell you this. Without the help of Our Creator I don't think I'd be here today.

Some of the places in this handbook I did go to and ask for help. Once I received the help I turned my back and went the other way. I never listened, only received. I have regretted this but now I ask you, "Please do not turn your back on help. They are there to help you and to listen to your needs, but do not take it for granted. One of these days you will tell your children and grandchildren not to do as you may have done. Take what is given to you and also accept who you are and never be ashamed of your culture."

I would like to thank my teacher, LaVera.

Barbara Ann:
This is a resource book. It has information to help you in your time of need. I hope you can find the information in it that you would need to help. I am glad I was able to help you in some way. Thank you.

Bev:
I would like to share this resource book of Saskatoon with you. I am hoping this will enable you to find the necessary help in this book when you are in need.

Saskatoon Resource Book

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Alcoholics Anonymous ....
Basic Skills Development ....
Bethany House ....
Birth Control Clinic ....
Canada Employment Centre for Students ....
Child Find ....
Crisis Nursery ....
Elizabeth Fry Society ....
Friendship Inn ....
Healthy Mother, Healthy Baby ....
Impact House ....
Revenue Canada Taxation ....
Indian & Métis Friendship Center ....
Interval House ....
Job Finding Club/Working for Women ....
Larson House ....
Learning Center, SIAST Kelsey Campus ....
MacNeill Clinic ....
McKerracher Center ....
Mental Health Association ....
Métis Society of Saskatoon ....
Narcotics Anonymous ....
Saskatoon Police Department ....
Whitespruce Youth Treatment Center ....

[redacted]

Before she wrote this story, LaVera had long conversations with the people she calls Marie, Albert, and Mary. They said they want her to tell this story. They read it and made some changes before LaVera gave it to us. Except for Pine Grove Correctional Centre and LaVera, all the names of people and places have been changed.

I believe our lives are woven together like a spider web

LaVera Schiele
Pine Grove Correctional Centre, Prince Albert, SK

The classroom seemed very quiet. I could sometimes hear some hushed whispers from other students as I talked to Marie. All the students in this classroom were women. Most of them were young adults and most of them were Native. We are not a typical classroom in a typical school. We are part of Pine Grove, Saskatchewan's provincial correctional centre for women. All the students were prisoners. I was their teacher.

My conversation with Marie had grown serious. I could see the tension on her face. I had asked about the father of her children. She responded by saying, "He's the reason I'm in here. He's dead. I killed him."

"He had been adopted by a family from Kirby," Marie added. "Well, I mean a small place near Kirby."

"I'm from a small place near Kirby," I said. "What's its name?"

"Crocusville," Marie responded.

"I'm from Crocusville," I said. "Who adopted him? What's his name?"

"Albert and Mary Froese adopted him and his name is Kevin Anderson."

I told Marie I was good friends with Albert and Mary, and that I used to teach Kevin in Sunday School. Her face dropped. She looked shocked. And I was remembering hearing about Kevin's death a year earlier.

"I've got to read now," Marie said abruptly. She seemed to feel scared of my relationship with the Froeses and with Kevin. Marie and I had started to trust each other in the last few weeks. Now I hoped that she would not pull away from me.

I allowed Marie to withdraw from me for a day. Then I asked her to

Pine Grove
Correctional
Centre
Box 3003
Prince Albert,
SK
S6V 7J3

talk to me privately, in my office.

"Marie, I don't want you to feel that I am disappointed at you for what has happened," I said. "I want our relationship to be as it was."

She thanked me and said she thought I would understand. But she also said she was upset. She felt she had probably destroyed the good friendship she had with Albert and Mary.

I thought a lot over the next days about Marie's struggle. She had to come to terms with the way she felt inside. She still felt broken inside, so sad and guilty.

I knew and appreciated her gentle personality. I knew how much she wanted to "make it" when she was released from jail. I wanted to help in Marie's healing.

I understood Marie's struggle partly because of my own life. I had some very difficult years as a child. My own home had not always been a good place for me. Then, Mary and Albert gave me a lot of support. Perhaps I could help them come to understand Marie and come together with her again.

The more I reflected about this incident, the less it seemed that jail made any sense as "payment" for the crime. Soon Marie would be released. Her file would be marked "sentence served." But still the tragedy would be unresolved. Marie would still feel broken.

I wondered if it would be possible for Marie to feel whole. Could she feel truly healed? Could she ever think of Albert and Mary without imagining that they hated her?

I kept thinking about this. I knew I would be seeing the Froeses at a meeting of our church that was happening soon. I asked Marie, "Can I tell the Froeses that you'd like to talk with them?"

"No," was the reply.

"Well," I asked, "if they ask about you, can I tell them anything?" Marie said yes to this.

Albert was one of the first people I saw at the meeting. Our conversation found its way to Marie in such a way that Albert asked about her. I was glad to be able to keep my promise to Marie and to talk with Albert about her.

The fifteen minute coffee break grew into hours. Albert talked about Marie and Kevin's relationship. I couldn't believe how calm he was! Where was his anger?

I felt like he could only be that calm because healing had begun in his life.

Albert wanted me to tell Marie that he and Mary felt no anger toward her. They had come to love Marie as their daughter and they knew that Kevin could be difficult to live with. They knew that he had abused her.

Back in the classroom, Marie had a very big smile when I told her Albert had said to say "hi" to her!

A week later, smiling even more, she came to me with a thick envelope. Inside it were poems and writings about healing and about forgiveness. Most importantly, Marie had a letter from Albert and Mary telling her that they forgave her and continued to love her.

Since this experience, Marie has been released. She stayed out of Pine Grove for four months before she came back again. She told me that it was Albert and Mary's forgiveness that helped her stay out for as long as she did.

Marie also told me she often thought about Mary and Albert when she was with her children. She remembered how they would look after their children and she tried to copy their example.

When she first came to jail, Marie said she could not look at herself in the mirror. She felt too much hate for herself. Now, I think that because Mary and Albert forgave her, she can begin to forgive herself.

Mary still has much anger within her because of the things that have happened to her. But because of loving people like Albert and Mary, she has begun to heal and start to change.

I believe this story shows how our lives are woven together like a spider web. We are all connected to each other by experiences we have shared or people we have known. Even women very different from each other have something in common.

I first wrote this story as part of a journal I kept last year during an action research project sponsored by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) and funded by the National Literacy Secretariat. With eleven other adult literacy, basic education, and academic upgrading programs from across Canada, Pine Grove decided to do a woman-positive activity. The women in my class used their experience to develop resource booklets for women in crisis.

Members of the women's group look at a draft of their book, Women getting together. From left, Mary, Gerry, Marion, Yvonne, Jean, Sandra.

The politics of talking: Doing "woman-positive" in a learner-centred literacy program

Marion Wells
Saint John Learning Exchange, Saint John, NB

When I first became involved in CCLOW's action research project involving woman-positive activities, I was interested in discovering what women in other programs might be doing that we weren't. I read the term — woman-positive — and I was intrigued. As executive director of the Saint John Learning Exchange and a self-identified feminist, I felt rather pleased with the track record in our literacy program. I felt we were responsive to women's concerns and maybe I was looking for affirmation of that.

I don't think I have ever been unduly smug about what we were doing in the program, though. In fact I had several times questioned whether we were doing enough for women learners. My staff usually fielded my questions with well-put responses. They argued for a humanistic, equality-based learning and social environment, and we always tried to provide that.

My doubts about whether we had a good focus for meeting women's needs centred on whether we helped women solve their problems. Primarily, I saw women as victims — particularly undereducated and poor women. It is also true that I saw them as extraordinarily brave and very determined as they packed their kids off to babysitters or to school to put in three to six hours a day at the Centre. And I knew most of them were enormously social creatures in class and in the hallways, just as I am. I observed them both helping each other and giving moral support to the men in the groups. The social environment we nurture involves giving moral support generously. Women and men offer friendships which frequently cross gender boundaries. Men in the groups also give encouragement to women, as well as to their male comrades.

A lot of problem-solving takes place in our learning groups. Back then, when we were beginning to get to know CCLOW, I was satisfied that we were for the most part giving women learners what they needed from a literacy/basic education program. But I did always wonder whether we should have some women-only activities. Even though I thought we were already woman-positive, I wondered about our responsibility to help women deal with violence, sexual abuse, and lack of power.

Our counsellor does one-to-one counselling and refers women to agencies for help with specific problems. Perhaps, I thought, we should also be giving women

Saint John
Learning
Exchange
P.O. Box 6278
Station A
Saint John, NB
E2L 4R7

opportunities to talk about their problems using a group therapy approach. From these groups they would gain strength. Women-only groups would help women to find out more about the reasons for their disempowerment and determine ways they could gain control over the things that held them down and back.

The CCLOW research project seemed to be the perfect vehicle to get ideas for starting something new, whatever that might be.

Confronting the "f" word becomes a catalyst for understanding "woman-positive"

Two women on our staff — Mary Snow and Donna Lynn McNulty — expressed interest in pursuing the somewhat mysterious-sounding woman-positive project. They were both young, self-confident women — curious to find out what ideas they might pick up and pass on. Both were energetic workers with a clear grasp of our program's philosophy and purpose. As they prepared for the first national workshop in Winnipeg they gathered information on aspects of the centre to take with them. They wanted to showcase some of the activities they had developed with learners. They also wanted to find out more about CCLOW and ways it could help women in education.

When we met to discuss the workshop we identified the purpose of participating, from our point of view. Our purpose included learning more about CCLOW, getting ideas for activities, finding out how to conduct the research on the activities, and coming back to the program ready to embark on a process that would affect women's lives positively.

The Winnipeg workshop was a crucial learning point for us. It was intense enough to warrant the term catalyst.

The two women who returned from the workshop on woman-positive activities were angry. The workshop was not what they had been expecting. I felt uneasy as they talked. Something had gone very wrong for them. They sat with me for an hour and everything came out in a jumble. I wrote in my journal later:

> Mary and Donna Lynn really needed to talk! Woman-positive, woman-positive activities/programs — what do we really mean by these terms? Donna Lynn seems to feel the need to question her own lexicon of terms. She is confused...

It appears that at the workshop, part of the agenda was some sort of "teach-in" (to use a seventies term) to help women figure out where they stood in the feminist spectrum. Mary and Donna Lynn felt nervous about the process, primarily because they didn't really understand what was happening. They felt uncomfortable not knowing the ground rules and had the feeling that they were being judged by the workshop leaders and by other participants.

That episode caused me to reflect on my responsibility and my role in what had happened. I felt very concerned that I had not done enough to prepare Mary and Donna Lynn for this project. I also wondered whether I should have spent more time talking to CCLOW about the agenda for the workshop, for the entire project in fact.

Mary and Donna Lynn felt particularly frightened that they seemed to be expected to confess doubts about their male colleagues. They firmly rejected any notion of their male team members taking advantage of them, or working less and taking the glory, or undermining women in some other way. In so doing they perceived that they were regarded as dangerously naive or as political traitors.

I spent a lot of time listening to them and talking it over. In my journal, I reflected on what it might mean:

> My best inspiration [to finding an answer] comes from my daughter who, amongst her peers in graduate school, counts more women of her age who are afraid of the 'F' word [feminist]. She said "They freeze — they completely reject further conversation — they can't hear beyond their fear — they [become] powerless."

The question became: How to move on? I had two women left in limbo by their own paralysis and I was angry with women I hadn't even met. Rather hesitantly, I described the problem to Betty-Ann Lloyd, the research coordinator. Our discussion was a good one, and helpful. We realized we were dealing with big differences among women. We talked about the difficulty of reconciling agendas and the sometimes seemingly contradictory goals of woman-positive and feminist ideologies.

Betty-Ann suggested I call Jenny Horsman, a member of the research advisory committee who had first mentioned the project to me. When I called Jenny, I felt unsure of how to deal with my concerns, although I thought she would be able to see the problem clearly. I was in a dilemma and found it difficult to bring my uncertainty into focus. After a long talk with Jenny, I found I could figure things out again. Later I became suddenly exhilarated. I expressed it this way:

> When we were floundering around, it was woman-positive support [from CCLOW] that got us where we are. . . . It was extremely helpful and open-ended . . . and therefore [I felt] liberated to do it. I felt empowered.

This made sense of course. Our whole program ideology of personal empowerment translates into the actual, concrete support we give each other — the kind of non-directive, everyday counselling which helps you find the answer yourself. Betty-Ann and Jenny had both given me the support I needed to find the way to woman-positive support.

The answer, in our case, was to explore the meaning of woman-positive in a way that best suited our participants, our women. Donna Lynn withdrew from the project, I decided to take her place, and Mary, one of our program's counsellors, continued on with me. We decided one way of doing this would be to throw the idea out to see who would be interested in talking about what we might do as a woman-positive activity. Another way would be to suggest to a few women — a cross-section of female learners — that they could meet as a group, as part of a project looking at women's lives and how they might be enhanced. We chose the latter route.

The painful sadness of women's isolation was balanced by the delightful and peaceful joy of the women's group

We came together then, as a very small group. The idea was to bring others in later as they expressed interest in what we were doing. Four women learners, Mary, and I came together for the first time without a specific purpose, except for the woman-positive notion. I expected it to feel a little uncomfortable, but there was no tension. I remember I had arrived tired and a little preoccupied (I had been negotiating with one of our funders that morning). As I sat down and looked at the faces that greeted me, I felt I could relax.

There was a definite expectant sparkle in the eyes of the women. My expression was probably much like theirs — what's going to happen here? But we were all smiling at each other. We talked about the new women's centre, still in the planning stages, and discussed our reasons for wanting it to become a reality. On reflection, I think that this first meeting was the only time we took something external as a focal point.

Actually, the second hour of the group set the format for all subsequent meetings: Each woman talking spontaneously about things that mattered to her. With a sudden chill of recognition, I realized that we were talking about the daily pain and discomfiture of women's lives. The themes were all there: lack of understanding, no power to speak of, limited choices, fear of condemnation. Nobody said that all this originated largely with men. The talk was satisfying and it was self-affirming.

As we went through the first few meetings, I kept experiencing feelings of uncertainty, almost disorientation. It was like — I am here and it feels really good! I had to make myself believe that it was okay to feel good in this way. At the same time I was hearing about women's lives and what I was hearing reaffirmed concretely everything I felt and thought I understood about women's lives. It was very mind-expanding. Absolutely like a re-learning for me.

What I didn't know, though, was that I was ignorant of an aspect of women's lives which would be significant in the longer term. I wrote in my journal:

> The isolation expressed by the women in the group is isolation from other women. One described her feelings: "I feel I have no [women] friends outside of here. My husband tells me to go out for a while. I say, where shall I go? He says go to a mall and pick up a few things, you'll meet people there. So I go, and before I know it I've bought some things and I'm ready to go home. I haven't met anybody, I haven't talked to anybody. Men, they can go out and make friends with strangers — go to a bar or something, but women can't do that. It seems as if women can only meet other women if they have men with them."

I wondered about our literacy program. What were we doing for women who felt isolated? "Outside of here I have no women friends." Obviously we are providing opportunities for women to make friendships and to feel supported. I reflected further:

> The social needs of women, perhaps specifically undereducated women, pose questions for literacy programs. Our literacy program has always placed a big emphasis on its social environment. There is a comfortable, friendly atmosphere — people working in small groups, helping each other, debating issues, planning activities, creating stories, getting ready for job searches, rehearsing for performances, and quietly studying. Friendships blossom, but the groups of six or seven people predetermine these pairings.
>
> We ask that people commit to the small groups. And all of the groups are a mix of men and women, young and older people side by side. It is a hard question, but are our women learners getting the support here that truly addresses their needs? What will a woman's group or a woman's program do for them that is different?

There was a lot to think about. The cohesion of a program like ours, based as it is upon the ideals of equality and social empowerment, depends also upon cooperation and collaborative learning. My dawning awareness of women's isolation from each other confounded me. I expected them to feel excluded from mainstream social and economic power bases and all the male-dominated institutions. I knew they were left out of decisions involving their children and their own bodies. I had never thought of them as cut off from each other like separated siblings of a huge female family.

As we continued meeting, the painful sadness of this idea was often subsumed by the altogether delightful and peaceful joy we found. Talking about our experiences, our daily concerns, was a way of being happy, even if the particular situation we were discussing was sorrowful. I couldn't help thinking of all those allusions, made by men in literature over the centuries, to women's so-called innate sadness. The sorrowing woman, not quite tragic, but deeply pained, was understood by the male-writers as naturally sad because female.

Yes, it is true, I thought. Women are more sad than mad, and they laugh to keep going. But the sadness is caused by oppression.

Enjoying the simple gifts of openness and a remarkable absence of tension seems to contradict an understanding of "feminism" as concerned with BIG agendas

Something else was happening, in addition to the delights of companionship and bonding. There was the easy communication of ideas. And the flow of our conversations frequently led to satisfying, quiet, communal nods of agreement — a sort of shared wisdom.

"When he's lost something in the house, he says he wants me to help him

> find it. When I go to where I think it will be and find it, he says "How do you do that?" Everyone smiles. Yes, we know.
>
> "I have a fifteen year old daughter and all her friends, male and female, come every Saturday night to my house — movie night. We're all squashed into this apartment until eleven pm. I know where my kid is. She can go to other homes, but she has to stay in screaming distance of home." Everyone nods. Yes we know what you mean.

The strong feeling I got from the first few meetings of the women's group was that I was in a new place, or even a new space. The idea of shared wisdom is often used to describe the coming together of like minds, but what was revelatory to me was that I felt I was receiving so much — the simple gifts of openness and a remarkable absence of tension. I was unprepared for the rewards the meetings were beginning to yield. When I was going about my normal routine I would find myself getting a little boost of pleasure when the group would unexpectedly pop into my mind.

As the project continued, I realized my ideas were changing about how to be more woman-positive. I had always thought that if I was going to do something that would assist women, it would have to have a big agenda — doing something that concretely moved toward solving violence, incest, housing problems. It had to be organizing a Take Back the Night march, or setting up a transition house, or hiring a counsellor to deal specifically with childhood sexual assault memories. I hadn't thought that woman-positive might mean something less political, less active and organized. I hadn't thought about the ordinary reality of going to movies alone because somebody might assume you are a prostitute looking for company or feeling belittled around men you lived or worked with.

I had said early in the project that I thought woman-positive — like feminist — had to be about "the important work that has to be done." I discovered that something extremely valuable and woman-positive was really very simple to do. It was also right under our noses but we had never seen it. We had always, as properly trained facilitators, planned for activities and set objectives and desired outcomes. We viewed each activity from a problem-solving stance so that we could say at the end, "Did we accomplish our goal?" "Were our objectives met?" Now here we were arriving at meetings without agendas and plans, literally as though we had never known how to do things the other way. And Mary, my co-researcher at the program, had the same kind of revelation:

> All I ever saw [before the project] was the problems and the negative [aspects of women's lives] . . . my idea of this woman-positive thing really broadened from being just the crisis thing to what women need in general to make them happy and their lives productive and satisfactory to them.

While the women's group was finding out one way to be woman-positive, I was finding out a great deal about myself and about other women's lives. By keeping a journal, I was able to explore my own thoughts and reactions. Inevitably, I would think sometimes about the differences between my life and those of the women learners. Their isolation from other women was strange to me. I had not realized that this is a serious problem for women politically. When I wrote about men being the social conduit for these women, I was realizing the hard fact that women could be accused of being agents of their own disempowerment. Socialized to believe they don't amount to much without men, they stand by and watch men talking to each other like old buddies.

That they talked so much about their feelings of frustration meant that they wanted change. I found myself trying to understand more. I wondered why they felt silenced in social settings while men could "talk to each other in mixed company." I wrote:

> At some sort of new social grouping where most of the couples don't know each other, the men have no trouble relating to each other (the women learners say) but women don't know how to converse with other women beyond a polite hello, how are you . . . then there's nothing to say.

I went on:

> Does this mean that women are so stifled in social settings they (find themselves) physically unable to speak? Or that they are (feel) drastically alienated from members of their own sex? Or that they are so intent upon what their men are doing and saying that they can't help but concentrate on the conversation and interaction of the males?

Understanding the women's group as "sacred" space points to the ways in which the rest of the program was somehow less satisfying for women

Keeping a journal enabled me to reflect seriously on what the group was doing. It meant that I was discovering layers of meaning, but not necessarily answers. I also discovered important implications for the program as a whole. For example, I found that women learners were not writing about the women's group when they were in their regular classes. After we had the women's group, students would go back to their group rooms, looking "satisfied," as one of the staff said. But they wrote about other things, as if the women's group was something very private. Another staff sensed that one learner seemed to want to protect the group. Not its members, but the thing itself in some way. "It's very special to her, I get the feeling it's a little bit sacred."

This lack of writing about the group could have been raised with the women, but I decided I didn't want to ask directly whether they had thought about writing about the group. This is the way Mary and I proceeded all along. We stayed away from asking leading questions of the women learners. We didn't want to cause things to happen. We watched the women and ourselves, as a group, unfold like a flower opening. This was our best way to explore.

In a similar way, in one group session we just allowed the conversation to find its own course and thus avoided having to ask a research question: "What did we get out of the group?" All it took was for somebody to say how good the group was for her and another to say how much enjoyment she was experiencing. Suddenly, we were talking about how happy we all felt at that moment. We knew we wanted to keep meeting and we knew we wanted other women to know about us.

You could practically feel the question on everybody's mind: "Why did the meetings make us all feel satisfied?" Soon we had a list of reasons from support to friendship to freedom. One woman said she got a great feeling of relief just to be able to talk, and be heard, and feel the pressure lifting. Others nodded, yes. Another woman said part of the relief came from feeling "We can be ourselves — it doesn't matter if I'm myself here," and a third added "It's (all about) women's things (but) you don't feel silly." We knew exactly what that meant and in our final declaration of self-actualization we triumphed in our freedom to do what we liked. Nobody ever said to us, "This is how it's going to be." A month later I wrote:

> I feel I've had my eyes opened, but I still can't quite believe what has happened. I'm unlearning things, seeing things in a new way . . . I didn't know (before this) that you could be woman-positive without considerable effort being made.

One of the women has said that she felt relief when she was with the rest of us and I think my feeling in the group was very close to that. But it was the revelation that I was making more than one discovery, not only about the group but about its effect upon me, and therefore about me as a person. Put simply, I was discovering an important missing piece of myself, a small but significant void was being filled. I was grateful for this discovery and the way I was learning about my own needs.

I wondered about the others — what were their lives like as a whole? After all, the group was only meeting for a couple of hours every week or two. In truth, I reflected, their lives were probably much like mine. Probably the only time they had for themselves was in the bathroom and later in the solitude of sleep. It is not simply about being overstretched and worn out trying to meet the demands made on us by others. Nor is it only about women being nurturers or selfless givers and trying to take back something we have lost. Somehow it was the idea of enjoying being a woman, of identifying with women's lives. It was having this one time to be ourselves for a change.

But does this gentle kind of woman-positive activity make any real difference in women's lives?

As the women in the group expressed it — "It doesn't matter [no one will mind] if I'm myself here." We were experiencing the chance to be ourselves in the group and this is central to the kind of discovery I believe we have made. Even as I make this statement, however, I realize it raises questions as to whether we advance women's causes — or feminist causes — by providing ways for women to feel more fulfilled in their lives as they are. How does it make any real difference?

I can't help but think of the statement sometimes used by prison administrators in the connection between education and crime. The argument goes: "If you make a criminal better educated, all you then have is a better educated criminal." For women in literacy programs, there are similar vicious clichés. Even for some feminists, the fear exists that women simply talking and listening to each other will only help to keep them where they are — still oppressed, though perhaps feeling less isolated and alone. But, surely, it is empowering for women to discover that they get stronger when they talk to other women. Surely we can't see this as a way of keeping women disempowered. On the contrary, for learner-centred literacy programs, I would argue that women are going to get a better deal if women's groups are offered and are women-driven, that is, women-learner-centred.

I think it is important to remind ourselves of the woman-negative possibilities if women's groups are misunderstood by literacy practitioners and adult educators. I do not think we should consider radicalizing women in literacy programs. We shouldn't enter into groups with them to raise their consciousness or help them overcome false consciousness. To do so implies that they are unable or unwilling to do that work for themselves, that we know better than they do what might help them work through the difficulties they face. They will tell us what they want.

The women in our group wanted to feel good about themselves, to feel stronger and to be taken seriously. Once women have come together and begin to feel more powerful, they may want to work to "improve their lot." If and when that happens, we should be ready ourselves to work with them for change.

The concept of woman-positive activity and its practical implementation requires the acceptance of certain basic principles. For facilitators of woman-positive activities, it is necessary to be able to "let go" of personal, professional, and political agendas, and to trust the women involved. This does lend an exploratory aspect to the activity, but if we keep in mind the above, there should be no need to fear failure. As I have stated, women-learner-driven groups or projects obviously fit learner-centred programs. Further, learner-centred approaches are by themselves empowering if they are well understood by literacy workers. Thus a woman-positive activity is one which addresses the needs of women who spend most of their lives not being themselves. By allowing them the security and support in which they can be themselves, such an activity is one of self-actualization. Women who spend their lives not fully feeling their own feelings or being ashamed or embarrassed by being who they are will, in a truly woman-positive activity, inevitably become more empowered.

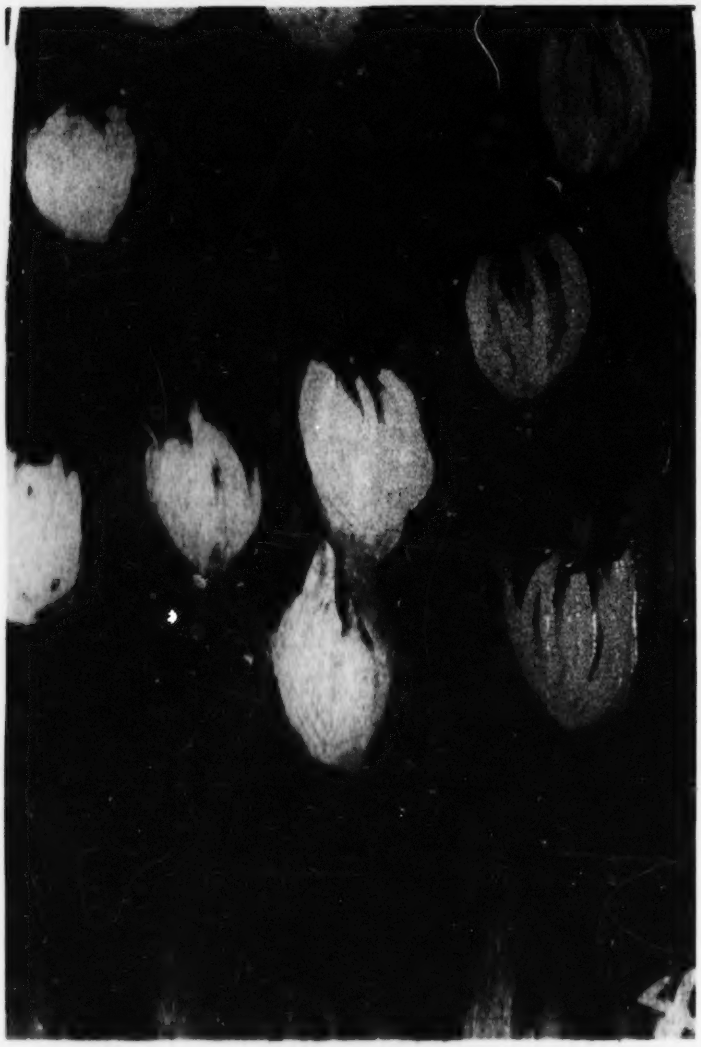
The following pages contain excerpts from a book produced by the Women's Committee of Beat the Street, Toronto, Ontario.

[redacted]

RECIPES FOR POLITICAL ACTION

Beat the Street

Women's Committee



This book is dedicated to
all the women who have died on the street.
Three women we know
died alone
while we worked on this book.
Their lives should be remembered,
not forgotten.

Recipes for political action

Why a Women's Committee?

The Beat the Street program was started in 1986 by two men who were from the streets. The idea was to have a literacy program for street people and have it run in a way that was comfortable to street people. For men and particularly white men this principle worked well.

Women on the street are abused and exploited in more sexual and violent ways because they are considered objects and not people. These attitudes towards women were accepted at Beat the Street because some male staff felt that it was just the way men were and that there was no need to interfere.

The fear that women lived with on the street made them afraid to report incidents of abuse and harassment that happened in the centre. There were no guidelines or policies for staff to follow and staff were not given training on these issues. When a woman was assaulted or harassed in the centre, the offender was often allowed to return.

The first time that women were brought together without men present was in June of 1991. The women each shared an abusive or violent situation that had happened to them at Beat the Street. During this and our second meeting a month later, we were constantly harassed by male students that did not think that we had the right to meet without them. As a result, the women chose to hold a monthly women's meeting and a weekly women's literacy drop-in night on a night when no men were allowed in the centre.

The Women's Committee has been meeting and organizing for a year now. As a result of the Women's Committee, Beat the Street has become a safer and friendlier place for women to learn.

The Struggle For Women at Beat the Street Is not Over
It Has Just Begun
Peace and Love, Robin

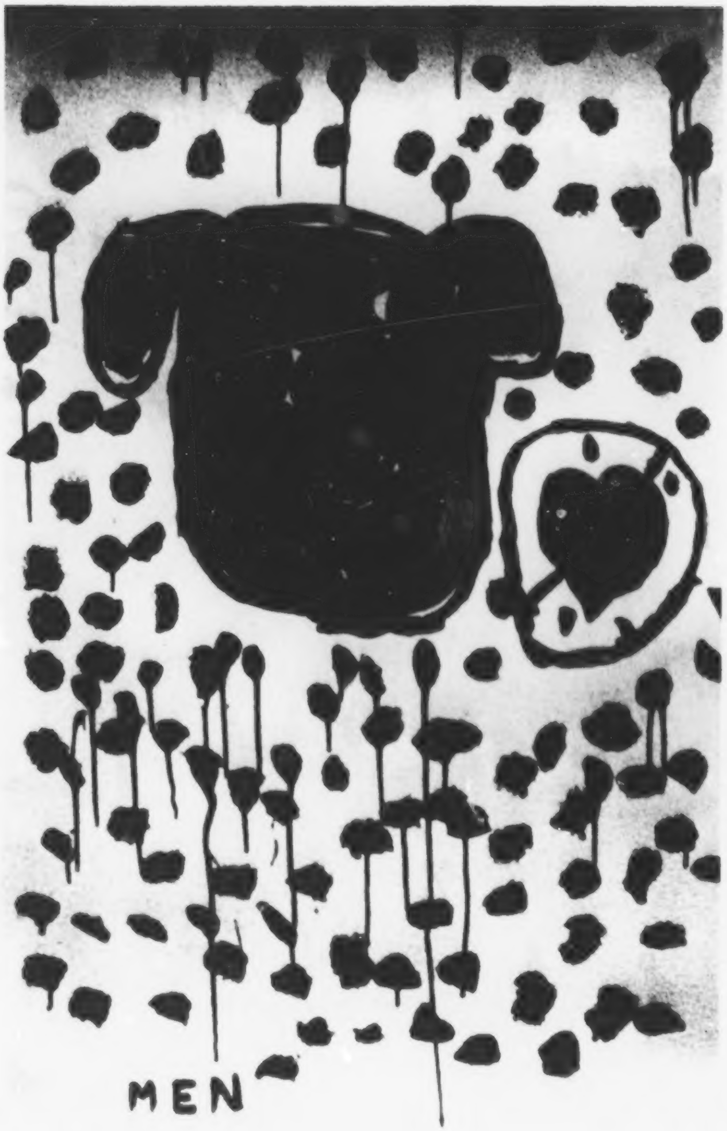
Beat the Street
85 Shuter St
First Floor
Toronto, ON
M5B 1B3

TUESDAY

Beat the Street Women's Night

On Tuesday nights I go to a special, comfortable place,
an honest place. Everyone is open.
Though we're all from different places,
we have much in common. We all have a strange past,
we've all been victims of other people's madness and fear.
We come in for friendship and reassurance
that we don't have to be lonely
in an ignorant, concrete world.
We learn from each other in many ways.
We feel strength in numbers.
We have seen the best and worst of society
reflected in our pleasure and pain.
We know what hurts and why.
We know how to give and take.
We learn more courage daily
than many others will ever know;
by what we read and write, and by experience.
This time is important on Tuesdays:
a place to come to where we remember
how necessary it is to make each other happy and feel secure,
even if it is only for a few hours.

Jayne


MEN

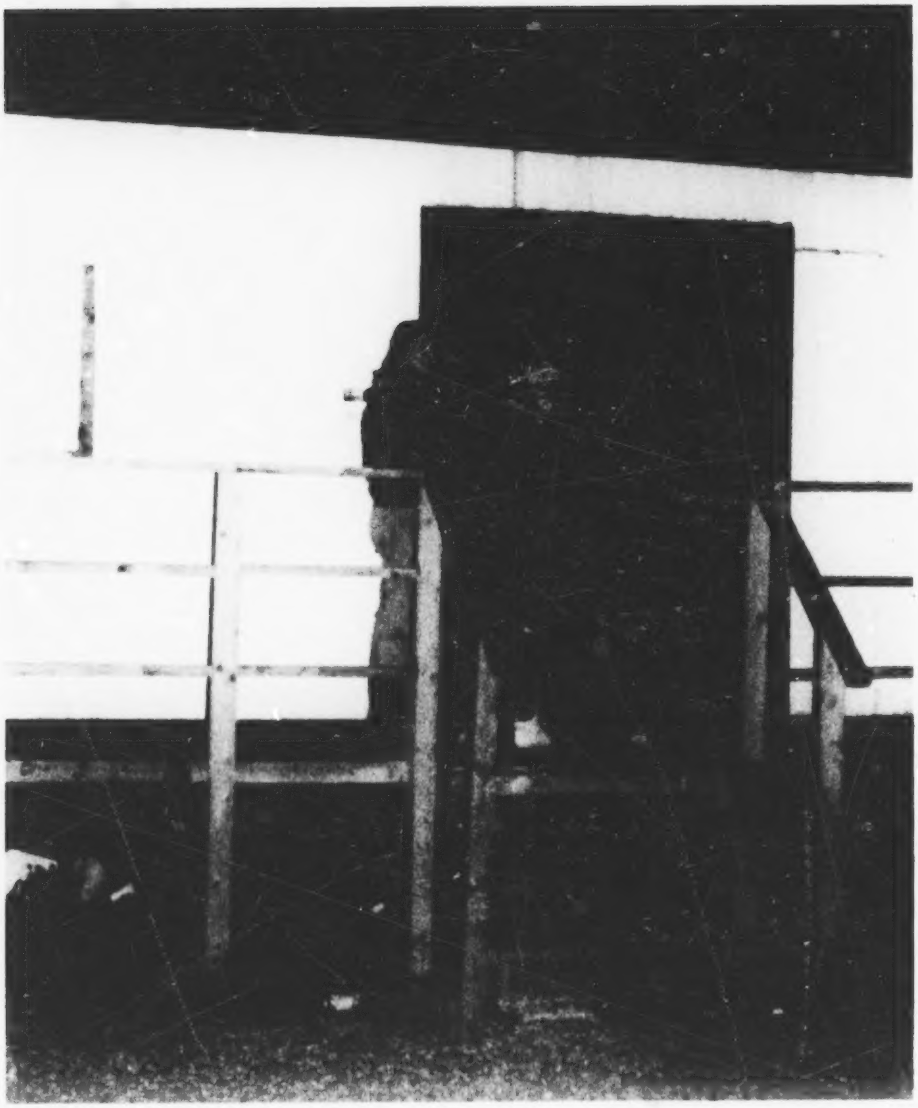
For Art's Sake

Beat the Street had a daytime art program.
At the Women's Committee, some women said
they were not comfortable going to the art program.
We decided to do art on Tuesday nights.

One night in May of 1992,
we decided to paint how we felt.
Each woman said one word that was important to her
and we wrote them all on pieces of paper.
The words were: safety, violence, sanity, feminist,
pregnancy, men, power, relations, danger.
Each woman pulled one word from a hat,
and painted what it meant to her.
If we didn't like the word we got, we pulled another.

One woman got the word 'men'.
She had been raped by her uncle and was pregnant.
She painted what she was feeling. She painted a pig.

We left our paintings up to dry, like we did every week.
The next day, the men at Beat the Street were angry.
They said the painting was man-hating, unfair and sexist.
Men said, "I am not a pig."
They demanded that we take the painting down.
They could not understand this woman's anger.



Running Away from Home

Ever since I was twelve years old, I ran away from home.
It all began when I had a boyfriend named Erin.
He was allowed to do stuff that I couldn't.
So I wanted to feel what it was like to run away.
I skipped school to get the hang of taking off
and pretty soon I was doing it all the time.
My friend Patricia tried to warn me that Erin was bad news
but I wouldn't listen.
I thought by skipping school he would like me better.
In a few months the big question came up,
"Will you run away with me?" Of course I did.
Later that night I snuck out of the house and went with him.
My mother came and got me at his house.
I never saw him again. THANK GOD!
Ever since that day I have been on the streets.
I am fourteen years old now and feel like 100.
I have huffed glue and fought for food and money.
I have gotten beat up and raped many times.
It will keep happening if I don't get my life together now!

Cristal

Last week a shelter evicted an older woman to freeze to death in a stairwell and people all remembered she had some money in her pocket. **I wonder how many people remembered her name.**

Pat

Where are we now?

Looking back, the effects the Women's Committee has had on Beat the Street have been like a large shock wave. This has had both a positive and negative effect on students.

Adverse effects have been the violence that happened when the women first met. Many of the male students were feeling that the women's committee not only challenged their power, it threatened the control in relationships that they controlled.

Many of the women have expressed that they feel a sense of power in their lives since the Women's Committee started. This is due to the bonding that has taken place between the women. Much of this bonding has come from sharing the abuse in their lives.

Some women have chosen not to be involved in the Women's Committee because of pressure from boyfriends. I have come to this conclusion based on comments from them or actions I have seen. Another factor is the innuendo comments some male students make in regards to Women's Night or the Women's Committee. There are always questions about what happens at Women's Night.

I felt more resistance towards Women's Night a year ago than I do now. Some of this is due to male staff increasing their understanding of the issues as well as acceptance of the inevitable. Some male staff have always supported the women having a safe environment to learn.

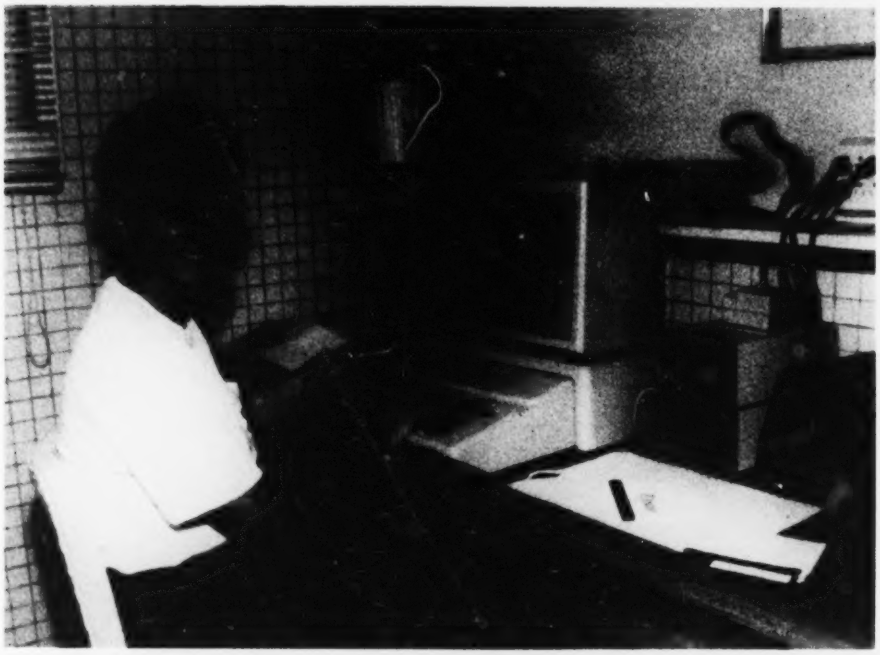
Pat

Woman ♀
child
men ♂
by: Robin
Leaving
insecure
confused
Beat the Street
unequal

What still needs to be done?

- safety issues for the women at Beat the Street
- respect for all the people who come to Beat the Street, especially women
- more education around these issues, especially policies around sexual harassment and sexual assault
- more activities for women
- more services for women, like self-defence, being able to feel comfortable coming to the centre
- more female staff to understand the problems that are often not understood by male staff

Pipsqueak



Paula Davies

Mary Ann Tierney

More than semantics: Reflections on "feminist"/"woman-positive" practices in a literacy classroom

Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney
College of New Caledonia, Prince George, BC

For the past year we have been examining, discussing, analyzing, and keeping journals about our teaching practice. This process has been exciting, enervating, and painful. In this article we'd like to share some of that process

In the spring of 1991, The Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) released the initial report of a two phase research project called Discovering the strength of our voices: Women and literacy programs (Lloyd, 1991a). Phase one of the research looked into women's experiences in literacy programs. As they said in their kit, at the end of this research one thing seemed clear — if literacy work is done in a way that is good for women, then it will have to be done differently than it is now. This result led to phase two of the research centring around the question of what actually happens when women in a literacy program decide to do something woman-positive, something specifically for women. Interested women literacy workers were invited to participate in this phase of the research. As literacy instructors and feminists, we thought this would be an interesting project to be involved in and so we signed up.

We are two women who teach at a local community college. We have worked in the field of English as a Second Language, Upgrading, and Adult Literacy for many years. The idea of doing something specifically for women students appealed to us both. We had already planned to team teach a weekly writing group for literacy level students and saw this as a wonderful opportunity to actively combine two topics that we care about very much — literacy and women's issues.

In retrospect we did not think out very clearly how we would do something specifically for women within this literacy writing group. Our initial plan for the research was to observe and record what happened in our classroom, in our institution, and in our relationships with colleagues when we openly brought an attitude that was positive to women into this literacy class. Because both of us share similar teaching philosophies and feminist viewpoints, we assumed this project would be fun, interesting, and beneficial to us and our students. What we didn't realize was how WE would become the focus of the research!

College of
New
Caledonia
3330-22 Ave
Prince
George, BC
V2N 1P8

Woman-positive writing group

For the first couple of months of the writing group, we earnestly watched for observations we could make that indicated something positive was happening for women in the mixed male/female class. Upon reflection, we are not sure what we thought we would observe. The literacy objective to help students improve their writing ability was always clear. What was less clear was what exactly it meant to both incorporate an approach that was specifically supportive of women students and to observe the consequences of that approach.

We were hoping to create a comfortable, supportive environment in which students, women in particular, would feel they could speak out, offer opinions, express their ideas, bring forward their unique perspective on a variety of topics, and be supported when doing that. We realized that this didn't sound particularly radical. Surely we try to do that in every class we teach. So what then did we think made this writing group particularly positive for women?

At the time, the very act of defining the class as positive for women was one kind of step in that direction. The power of naming the experience, at least for a while, became the experience. Eventually, however, frustration and doubts about what we were doing, or not doing, began to niggle at us.

There was no shortage of exciting literacy achievements to observe. We saw students become able to move first draft copy to a more polished state. We observed students develop the ability to critically analyze and comment on each other's work. We saw a growing confidence in their writing skills and pride in their finished products.

We did not have much to record, however, that seemed particularly feminist and for that we blamed our observation skills. We had some comments from female students which raised a women's perspective on a specific issue, but we had nothing of the meaty challenging debate we had hoped to stimulate in this literacy writing class.

> JOURNAL ENTRY — MARY ANN .... Dec. 4, 1991
>
> Paula started the class by talking about some of the connections to peace she noticed in students' writings. She talked about the joy the women felt when fighting between countries ended and loved ones returned from dangerous situations. In this piece I noticed that there was no mention of nationalist sentiments — no joy about which country had won or lost, but only that people were safe. Is that a woman's perspective? I think so.

In the writing class we used a thematic approach accepting some direction from students on the choice of themes as well as our own choices. During the year, we wrote on the themes of Identity, Peace, and Fashion (chosen by us) and Love/Hate and Employment (chosen by the students). These themes are mentioned only to show how our thinking changed as we worked through the project. We thought that the first two themes of Identity and Peace would lend themselves particularly to a feminist perspective. We imagined the rich and enlightening feminist discussions that would arise from these themes.

Two things happened for us during this time. The first was that, while the discussion and writing was interesting, it was not purposefully feminist. Our students, by this time all women, were not critically questioning the conditions of their lives that result from the fact that they are women. The second was that we saw that almost any theme could incorporate an approach that was positive to women by providing an opportunity and the encouragement for their voices to be heard. So while a couple of the themes were not of particular interest to us, they became more interesting when the woman-positive aspect was added. Realizing that any theme could involve a woman-positive perspective was one of the revelations that began our discomfort.

If any topic could incorporate a woman-positive approach and if we thought of ourselves as feminists, why did introducing this approach into a literacy writing group seem like such an innovative, challenging idea in the first place?

Support and permission to reflect

As mentioned earlier, the very act of defining the class as one that would be positive for women brought a new dimension, at least in theory, to our teaching and this was exciting. Similarly, being part of a nation-wide research project which had as its focus the exploration of what it means to be woman-positive gave us permission to examine the role our feminism plays in our teaching practice. Now that the project is over, as we reflect back over the myriad experiences this research afforded us, the one that stands out most strongly, for both of us, is the magical time we spent together talking about the work we love. Rarely do teachers have the luxury of time to engage in this type of reflective activity. For this research, however, participants (two from each of twelve programs) were paid to do just that for one half day each week. Our initial enthusiasm and interest came from these sources.

> JOURNAL ENTRY — MARY ANN............... MAY 6, 1992
>
> Working with Paula and CCLOW has given me the time and opportunity to explore these questions and to receive the support I have needed. At one of the group sessions during the second national workshop for the project we were talking about support. I said I got my greatest support from Paula.
>
> She said that she also felt a lot of support by being part of the CCLOW project. That really surprised me because I didn't really think of the larger group in such personal terms.
>
> Since then I've been thinking a good deal about where my support comes from. I think Paula is right. Without CCLOW I wouldn't have examined my classroom practice so carefully in terms of how my practice influences women in my classes.
>
> Paula and I have been friends for a long time and have certainly talked

> about women's issues outside the classroom. We've worked on many projects that deal with women, but have never spent the same amount of time talking, thinking, agonizing, rejoicing about our own practice with women in the classroom as we have during this project. I know that being part of CCLOW's project legitimized doing that in my mind. That's a sorry comment on my state of commitment, but unfortunately a true one. It's almost as though I was waiting for some kind of permission to do what intellectually I know is the right thing to do.

Feminist teachers, woman-positive classrooms

One of the things that we became aware of as the research progressed was the interchangeable use we were making of two terms: feminist and woman-positive. In all written material about phase one and phase two of this research, Betty-Ann Lloyd consistently used the term woman-positive to identify the focus of the work. In contrast, when we discussed what we hoped to do in our literacy writing group, we often substituted the word feminist in place of woman-positive. At first this did not seem to be a problem and in fact we were not even aware of making such a switch. As time wore on, however, and we began to question more and more the lack of feminist practice in our classrooms, the significance of our use of this word became apparent.

For us, the term feminism brings with it a political and social analysis of the causes of women's oppression, whereas the term woman-positive does not. To be feminist is to have a conceptual framework that places specific acts of sexism within a larger context. Feminism implies a need to be active in the political arena on a more collective level in order to ultimately deal with individual women's oppression.

Being woman-positive came to mean encouraging women to express their ideas and opinions, to examine and reflect on their lives and experiences as women, and to support them in this process. A definition of feminism by Ruth Pierson highlights the difference for us.

> Feminists start from an insistence on the importance of women and women's experience, but a woman-centered perspective alone does not constitute feminism. Before a woman-centered perspective becomes a feminist perspective, it has to have been politicized by the experience of women in pursuit of self determination coming into conflict with a sex/gender system of male dominance. (cited in Lewis, 1992, p. 170)

The difference between these definitions, and the implications that difference has for our classroom practice, only became apparent after the writing class had ended. Throughout the research itself we continually questioned the lack of feminist, but not woman-positive, activity in our classes. We felt we had become more consciously woman-positive and, in that process recognized how much we were not articulating or practicing feminism.

It was during this painful self-questioning process that the focus of the research changed from what was happening to our students to what was happening to us. Much to our dismay it appeared to us as though we mostly left our feminism outside the door when we walked into the classroom. Calling ourselves feminist did not make us feminist instructors. Where had we gone wrong? Of course we didn't tolerate blatantly sexist comments or behaviour from any student. And we raised a woman's point of view when it was appropriate to the literature we were studying in class. But that hardly seemed as pro-active on women's issues as we view ourselves to be. Had we lost our energy to fight the good fight or had we never consciously taken our political and social analysis of women's issues into our literacy classes?

On the one hand we consider ourselves to be good literacy instructors. We work hard in the classroom with positive results. We spend a considerable amount of our spare time reading in the field and are repeatedly excited by those ideas and strategies that indicate an emphasis on helping students find their voice and exercise their personal and collective power.

On the other hand we consider ourselves to be feminists and have participated in countless meetings, rallies, conferences, workshops, and protests in an attempt to have women's issues heard and acted upon. Again we have spent considerable time reading about women's concerns and have been stimulated by stories and actions of sisters throughout the world. Why then does it seem that these two activities have remained separate for us? What has stopped us from bringing our feminist ideals into the classroom? Shouldn't a feminist perspective be added to any debate or discussion? Would a woman-positive approach in the classroom look different than a feminist one? Did these terms imply different things? We kept returning to these types of questions and only circling around the answers.

Feminist pedagogy and critical pedagogy: Where does feminist literacy work fit?

One possible contributing factor is the nature of what we have been reading. Articles on women's studies classrooms and what goes on in them raise a myriad of interesting issues and concerns, both for the students and instructors, and contribute to the development of feminist scholarship.

Because most of the literature arises from work carried on at the university level, however, it doesn't speak to feminist literacy workers or address the issue of raising those kinds of concerns in a literacy classroom. University students are aware of the feminist focus of courses and express a desire or at least a willingness to pursue issues from that perspective when they opt to take such courses. Literacy students don't make those kinds of choices, in part because the opportunity to improve literacy skills by studying material from a feminist perspective is not open to them and in part because most literacy students don't name themselves as feminists. However, despite this apparent separation between feminism and literacy, it became impossible for us to read about feminist classroom practice in a university graduate women's studies course without making the connection between that and what we were doing daily in our own literacy classrooms.

Similarly, the literature that we read on critical pedagogy raising the issue of empowerment and voice for non-mainstream learners just didn't seem to focus enough attention on the needs of women students. As Betty-Ann Lloyd (1992a) wrote in an article arising out of the first phase of this research, being learner-centred does not necessarily mean being woman-positive. Somewhere between feminist pedagogy and critical pedagogy lies the topic of successfully raising feminist issues in literacy classes.

In our experience, the task of doing this is not an easy one. Magda Lewis (1992) also identifies this difficulty in her own university level women's studies course.

> Based on my own experiences, I know that a feminist perspective could offer understandings the students might develop and bring to bear on their own experiences.... Yet I also realize that attending to feminist politics and cultural critique in the classroom requires difficult emotional work from them and from me. I know that new understandings are often experienced painfully and that lives are transformed. (p. 172)

While we were searching to find a way to incorporate more feminism into our classroom practice, we were aware of some obstacles to doing this. One of our main concerns had to do with the difference in background and power between ourselves and our students.

We are both Canadian, white, middleclass, well-educated women working in an academic setting. We are both of the generation that got its political feet wet in the 1960s and 1970s. The assertion of our feminist beliefs affects our professional lives, but only as discussion and action with other professionals. Supporting the union in its demand for a sexual harassment policy, pushing for better working conditions for part-time employees who are mostly women, engaging in debate with other faculty members on feminist issues are all instances where our feminist perspective is clear and active. However, all of these instances are between professionals.

While we are not minimizing the importance of these activities, because they do represent who we are as feminists in our professional lives, we were misled by them. We made the assumption, based on our professional activities and those in our private lives, that we asserted feminist beliefs in every aspect of our lives. It became apparent to us as we continued to work with our writing group that a strong feminist perspective was not evident in our literacy work with students. Upon careful reflection on this problem, we identified the differences in background that exist between ourselves and our students as one of the inhibiting factors to bringing our view of feminism into the classroom.

We recognize that we approach feminism from a position of privilege compared to many women in our literacy classes and around the world. Because of our relative good fortune and our cultural background, we have a different perspective on women's issues than many of our students.

Most of the students in this writing group were not born in Canada, and those who were are not from the middle-class and have not had particularly good educational experiences. They do not name themselves as feminists. Therefore much of the feminist literature and thought that interests us does not speak to their needs or wants. While we talk about feminism as a sisterhood and we want to include all women in this sisterhood, differences in class, culture, economic and life circumstances cannot be ignored. How we, the more privileged women, define feminism excludes many women in literacy classes. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise (1990) also recognize this:

> A defining assumption of feminism is that 'woman' is a necessary and valid category because all women share, by virtue of being women, a set of common experiences. These shared experiences derive, not causally from supposed 'biological facts' but women's common experience of oppression. That is, 'woman' is a socially and politically constructed category, the ontological basis of which lies in a set of experiences rooted in the material world.
>
> However, to say that women share 'experiences of oppression' is not to say that we share the same experiences. The social contexts within which different kinds of women live, work, struggle and make sense of their lives differ widely across the world and between different groupings of women. We argue that the experience of 'women' is ontologically fractured and complex because we do not all share one single and unseamed material reality. We also suggest that the category 'woman' used in academic feminist writing then (and, to an extent, now) actually reflected the experiences and analysis of white, middle-class, heterosexual, First World, women only, yet treated these as universals. (pp. 21-22)

While we are struggling to incorporate a feminist perspective into our literacy classes, we want to remain sensitive to the fact that our experiences are not the same as our students' and that we must approach this carefully. As Magda Lewis (1992) states,

> We must choose words carefully and negotiate our analyses with the women students in ways that will not turn them away from the knowledge they carry in their experiences. (p. 175)

As well, in any classroom there is a power imbalance. The teacher holds more power than the students. This is especially true in classes such as ours where many students from countries other than Canada hold the teacher and her opinions in high esteem. How then can a true dialogue on controversial issues take place?

This issue is referred to in one of our journal entries. The students were writing a covering letter for a resume and the issues of employers asking for age and marital status came up:

JOURNAL ENTRY — PAULA...................APRIL 15, 1992

> The same student added that in India you are also asked for your marital status when you apply for work. When we talked about how this kind of information can be used to discriminate against women, the response was polite, but I sensed that the sympathy seemed to lie with the employer who is not able (in Canada) to get the information that he (she?) needs to hire a faithful and reliable employee. I believe that the students in this class are, by culture, too polite to have a good discussion/debate on this issue — I think the power imbalance in our relationship (teacher/student), no matter how equal we try to be, also inhibits a rousing debate that may have gone on over these issues had they been raised in a class of literacy students where English was not the second language.

While we were not bothered by pointing out the differences that exist between Canadian laws and those from the students' countries, we felt that the power imbalance that exists between student and teacher inhibited the debate. Because we recognize this power imbalance we did not want to seem to be using our power to impose on students "the correct feminist perspective" — namely our own.

There were other examples of this happening in the classroom. We had an interesting exchange with a student in our class. She came to class one day proudly beaming and sharing the news that she was pregnant. A couple of weeks later her demeanor was not so joyous as she sadly explained that the heart beat of the fetus indicated it was a girl. She was distressed by this because in her culture baby girls are not valued and mothers of baby girls lose status.

Hearing this upset us and some of the other women in the class. We responded by echoing the traditional North American platitude: It doesn't matter if it's a boy or girl as long as the baby is healthy. She acknowledged our point politely and noncomittally but explained that the real problem was with baby number two. She and her husband only want two children and she would have to abort the next pregnancy if the fetus was determined to be a girl. We expressed our sadness that she felt that way. Our attempts to continue discussing the issue were not successful. Several of her classmates, however, were able to more openly express what they really thought about her point of view. There was no power imbalance that inhibited a frank discussion among them.

However, we did not want to position ourselves as the knowers of what were the correct ways of thinking about women's lives. By doing that we would have been acting in a very non-feminist way. As instructors and feminists, we think it is important to recognize, appreciate, and validate the knowledge and experiences that literacy students bring with them. But we also feel that it is essential to challenge the gender biased norms of our society. Our problem was how to do this in a way that did not negate the student's experiences and silence them in our class.

As we continued to work on this research project we also struggled with the problem of whose agenda we were serving. Our class had been advertised as a literacy level writing group. Students who joined the class did so because they wanted to improve their writing skills. Helping students to do that was the literacy objective that we set for ourselves as instructors. The complication arose when we tried to incorporate a feminist perspective to the writing. We knew our students didn't name themselves as feminists so whose agenda were we now serving?

As seen from this journal entry, we struggled with this question:

> JOURNAL ENTRY — PAULA ....JANUARY 22, 1992
>
> Another issue that was discussed (yet again) by Mary Ann and me over the holidays was if, when, and how to let our students know that we are part of a research project. We feel very concerned that knowing this may change the way the students feel about the class, the way they write, discuss or participate. Mary Ann and I had intended to run a writing group before we had even heard of the CCLOW's research. The students have come to improve their writing and we have a commitment and obligation to see that our efforts are directed to that end. Will involving them in the research result in our ends being met but not theirs?

In the end the students literacy needs were met and their agenda was well served. We were not as successful in fulfilling the need we felt at the time to bring a feminist perspective to this literacy class.

The issue that at first looked merely like a semantic one proved to be more significant than we thought. Trying to understand why our classroom had not been a feminist one helped to bring into focus the differences between the terms woman-positive and feminist. Maybe a literacy classroom is not the place for feminist activity as we came to define it during this research project. But maybe it is the place for a woman-positive approach: an approach that supports women where they are, challenges them with new ideas about their lives and experiences. At this stage in our development as feminist literacy workers we are comfortable taking a woman-positive approach in the classroom. Our hesitancy to act feminist does not stem from lack of belief in feminist philosophy but rather from our inability to present these ideas in ways that are meaningful to our students. However, we view ourselves as at a stage in a process that will eventually help us develop the skills necessary to bring a pro-active feminist perspective to our classroom practice.

References

Lewis, Magda. (1992). Interrupting patriarchy: Politics, resistance and transformation in the feminist classroom. In Carmen Luke & Jennifer Gore (Eds.), Feminisms and critical pedagogy, pp. 167-191. New York: Routledge.

Lloyd, Betty-Ann. (1992a). Learner-centred/woman-positive: Research with adult literacy programs. Women's Education des femmes, 9 (3), 29-32.

——. (1992b). Why do we first have to deal with this question: "What about the men?" Pandora, 7 (1), 10-11.

——. (1991a). Discovering the strength of our voices: Women and literacy programs. Toronto: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women.

——. (1991b, May, June). Learner-centred does not necessarily mean woman-positive: The experience in literacy programs. Paper delivered at the annual meeting of Canadian Women's Studies, Kingston, ON, and at the annual meeting of CCLOW, Saskatoon, SK.

Stanley, Liz, & Wise, Sue. (1990). Method, methodology and epistemology in feminist research processes. In Liz Stanley (Ed.), Feminist praxis: Research, theory and epistemology in feminist sociology (pp. 20-60). London: Routledge.

Commentary I

Maggie Ramage
Instructor, Career Skills, College of New Caledonia

Your article is truly impressive. Not only is it easy to read, honest and refreshing, it's a very helpful piece of research. Through sharing your experiences you have really helped me to clarify the difference between "feminist" and "woman-positive" — something I didn't even know I was struggling with until I read your article.

I really echo your comments that reflection is a tremendous privilege and a very helpful process. To have that opportunity to do so with a friend and colleague is wonderful. Our department certainly is fortunate to have those opportunities.

Your writing is so "user-friendly." I had the feeling I was right with you in your observations, reflections, and struggles. Your honesty about the struggles and learnings helped me to be "in" the story.

If I had one critique, I guess it would be that I found some of your reflections unnecessarily self-effacing. I tried to make specific comments on post-it notes so you could respond to my responses.

Once again, thanks for sharing this piece with me. Hope my comments are helpful.

Commentary II

Jenny Horsman
Advisory Committee, Women and literacy research project

Your piece of writing and reflection encouraged me to think both about the women and literacy project and about my own work in literacy and around women's issues. Perhaps the point which resonated most strongly with me was your awareness that you had not really been bringing your feminism into the classroom and that to do so you had needed permission. I think it is a crucial point for feminist literacy workers to question ourselves on, and examine how we can make sure our feminism is present in such a way that it will encourage other women, and men, to explore their own attitudes and experience of the world and push us to continue to question our own attitudes in the light of other people's experience.

I found your self-criticism made me acknowledge my own silence around feminism in the literacy program. I think I used to consider it my bias. I first felt permission to explore issues of how to make a program more anti-racist and anti-ablist, and then could see that in the same vein to make a place that did not silence, exclude, or feel unsafe to anyone it must also be anti-sexist. (Although I found that once I began to read the challenges to the white, middle-class, western bias of much feminism I could see more the intertwining of issues of racism, ablism, heterosexism within feminism.) I have often wondered about why feminism felt hard to bring in. Is it because as a literacy worker I was used to championing other people's causes but not so clear that feminism was relevant to working class women? Was I concerned that it was like bringing in my religion (as one male literacy worker once said to me — women shouldn't teach feminism and he wouldn't teach his religion)? You too seem to puzzle what makes us need permission. I think it is an important question for us all to grapple with.

You also remind us how incredibly important reflection is. For that too in some ways we seem to need permission or at least just a little structuring. I was struck by the fact that even though you are both friends and colleagues you had not previously been doing the sort of reflection you did during this project. I wonder whether you will continue to keep journals and have these incredibly rich reflective conversations together once the project is over? I certainly know how hard it is to find the time, and was again aware of the parallel. When I led a women's group I only reflected with others on the staff when I was feeling unhappy about how the group was working, and it felt a bit of an admission of failure to bring my questions to a collective meeting. Later, I was writing curriculum with one of those colleagues and we were continually engaged in discussions together and I could see how much richer my work with the women's group would have been had I been talking to her then. So your writing reminds me of the value of reflection and challenges us all to find ways to structure critical, creative reflection into all our work, in spite of the degree of overwork in our programs.

You raise many more interesting questions which I cannot take up in detail. I think a crucial area to reflect on is the whole question of how we should bring in our feminism. That of course ties in to those questions you raise of the power difference between the teacher and learners (made even sharper if we are white and middle-class working with poor and/or immigrant or learners of colour). I feel we have been quite blocked on these questions by some interpretations of the learner-centred approach, which have led us, in our attempt to respond to learners' needs, to ignore how unlikely it is that learners can say they value and want to learn things which have been omitted or put down in mainstream society and media. I do not think we can expect learners to say they want to learn Black history or Feminism unless we tell them more about what is possible for them to work on. I also think we have felt we have to leave ourselves out to be learner-centred. I think we have to learn how to put ourselves into the mix in such a way that learners can disagree with our views. I want to learn how to name my own perspectives, and open up challenging discussion, without silencing others. I think to do that we do have to be careful not to suggest that our feminism gives us the right answers.

Perhaps to learn how to do all these difficult things, we, feminist literacy workers, need to be engaging in more discussion and reflection ourselves. So I am back again to the fact that I have taken away from your writing two key questions to mull over: how to be true to our feminism in our work in the classroom and how to make time for ongoing reflection. They seem pretty clearly connected. They will of course lead me on to all those other important questions you raise, such as how to struggle with power differences or the difference between woman-positive and feminist, which I haven't even begun to speak about.

So congratulations for jumping into such difficult and thought provoking discussion and thank you for encouraging me to jump in too! Good luck with your ongoing reflection!

Commentary III

Ann McQuaid

It was with great anticipation that I read your article. I had heard bits and pieces about the work you were trying to do and some discussions around the woman-positive/feminist perspectives. I wasn't really expecting the tone of sadness and disillusionment that seemed to come through when I read it. You seem very hard on yourselves for what you were unable to do — to introduce an active, engaging dialogue on feminist issues that would somehow feel empowering for both you and the women participants. Because of the focus of your article, the energy and dynamism of what you did do — the support for the participants as they became members of the literacy club and acquired the skills that they would define as empowering — doesn't really come through.

I wonder if you've minimized your achievements on two levels. First, nurturing critical analysis is a vital part of good literacy instruction and it seems to me that is the groundwork for feminist thinking, particularly as you've defined it — the ability to formulate the "conceptual framework" that you talked about. I'm not sure that feminist classrooms imply "a need to be active in the political arena on a more collective level"; maybe what they suggest is a need to recognize the validity of one's own experience, that these conditions are predicated upon one's gender, and only collective action can change those conditions. Mohanty talks of writing which is used to create self-knowledge as an oppositional activity in itself.

Second, I know you said woman-positive conditions should go on in all good classrooms, but as one who teaches in ABE, where the majority of students are women, it is still an incredibly difficult undertaking to support the women because they are women, to nurture their voices in a room where the few males (who also, of course, have real needs of their own) attempt to define their own voices in vigorous assertions which inevitably silence some of the women. More often than not, many of the group participants, both male and female, are openly hostile to discussion of women's issues.

What you have done, I think, is encouraging, because you have shown that one can, at least through the process you described, create some of the preconditions for feminist discussions.

Commentary IV

Betty-Ann Lloyd
Coordinating researcher, Women and literacy research project

As I read the final version of your article, I kept remembering the excitement and respect I felt during your very risky process of reflection, analysis, and documentation. When we first talked about the experiential learning cycle and the ways in which action research can bring about changes in women's understanding and practice, I wasn't sure how that would actually happen during this project. However, your work supported some of my most optimistic expectations and I am really grateful for the way in which you have made your own experience available to others through this article.

Your discussion of feminism and of woman-positive activity engaged me on several levels. On a personal level, I had to question the implications of what I mean when I talk about myself being feminist or being woman-positive and what I mean if I apply those labels to others. On a professional level, as a researcher, I felt challenged to better articulate my own agenda for what might happen in this project.

In the end, I think I disagree with the way in which you have currently resolved some of the questions you uncovered during the last year. As we have discussed, I interpret some of what you are saying as a distinction between feminism as content and woman-positive as attitude or process. I read you as arguing that

1) it is possible to do woman-positive activities by taking a positive attitude towards women and their lives, by providing space for women to talk about their lives in an environment that takes power relations into account, by offering different perspectives and options to women who seem to be restricted in their choices of how to understand and/or live their lives; and

2) it is possible to do feminist activities only when you are woman-positive and when you put forward a content that articulates a particular understanding of women's position in our society, that places women's lives within a conceptual framework that has been developed as feminist.

You quote Ruth Pierson in terms of the requirement that feminism moves beyond a woman-centred perspective to collective action against systemic male dominance. This is where I identify my disagreement with you — and I believe that disagreement comes out of our different definitions of feminism rather than out of anything you actually do in your literacy practice! I would work instead from Sue Wise's (1991) requirement that feminism be "concerned with adopting a moral-political stance to questions of power and powerlessness." (p. 248)

I am more comfortable with that definition because I don't believe that collective action against male-dominance is the defining characteristic of feminism. If that is the case, then action defined in relation to racism, class oppression, heterosexism, and discrimination based on abilities cannot be understood as feminist unless it is somehow articulated to male dominance. That requirement has been critiqued by women who do not have the privilege of fighting out of only one position — their position as [white, middle-class, formally educated, heterosexual] women — and by women who are not willing to put the reality of male dominance above the reality of white supremacy or capitalist oppression.

Also, the reality of many women's lives do not allow for them to participate in collective action. They may be too involved in simple survival to expend the time, energy, and resources required. Their concerns may not be included by those who have defined the basis of unity on which collective action in their area is being undertaken. They may not be able to get up the stairs to the meeting. They may not be able to hear the discussion or, if they can hear it, it may not be framed in language that they understand.

I don't think we can exclude these women from feminist action because of the circumstances of their lives. I also don't want to exclude your literacy practice because you are not using a women's studies or gender studies curriculum. I strongly believe that the way in which you have defined your woman-positive teaching is feminist. I can't accept that the only way that writing group would have been feminist is if you had imported your own curriculum into a space where it was unwanted or inappropriate! And I am wondering if what makes your practice more feminist at the end of this project than it was at the beginning is that you have become very conscious not only of the process of what you were doing but the consequences as well.

It seems to me that you took your feminist theory and your feminist activity from outside the classroom and applied it to your work in a community college classroom. On the basis of that application, you decided to do your work in a way that you felt both respected the women students' experience and did not enhance your already dominant position as teachers. You gave them as much room as you could to talk with each other honestly and to explore their own understanding of their lives in the context of what they came to class to learn. You did not exercise your power to put forward a feminist agenda, an agenda that I believe might have resulted in cultural imperialism — what Iris Marion Young (1990, pp. 39-65) outlines as one of the five faces of oppression.

I believe that your woman-positive approach was a feminist activity. I agree that it was not feminist activity as you came to define it during this project and I respect that we don't agree about this. I also look forward to your exploration of how you can become more pro-active on your own terms.

References:

Wise, Sue. (1991). Becoming a feminist social worker. In Liz Stanley (Ed.), Feminist praxis: Research, theory and epistemology in feminist sociology (pp. 236-249). London: Routledge.

Young, Iris Marion. (1990). Justice and the politics of difference. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Paula Davies and Mary Ann Tierney would like to acknowledge the support of Marcia Timbres, Department Chair, College Foundations, College of New Caledonia, Prince George, BC.

Bibliography

Women and education

Briskin, Linda. (1990). Feminist pedagogy: Teaching and learning liberation. Toronto: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women.

Brookes, Anne-Louise. (1993). Feminist pedagogy: An autobiographical approach. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

Bunch, Charlotte & Pollock, Sandra. (Eds.). (1983). Learning our way: Essays in feminist education. Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press.

Cox, Rita & Sanders, Leslie. (Eds.). (1989). Women and literacy (Special Issue). Canadian Woman Studies, 9 (3 & 4).

Dance, Terry & Witter, Susan. (1988). The privatization of training: Women pay the cost. Women's Education des femmes, 5 (2), 14-17.

Darville, Richard. (1992). Adult literacy work in Canada. Toronto: Canadian Association for Adult Education.

Decade of promise: An assessment of Canadian women's status in education, training and employment, 1976-1985. (1986). Toronto: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women.

Educating for change: Women in the next decade. (1984). Toronto: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women.

Education for women and girls: Recommendations for achieving equality. (1989). Toronto: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women.

Ellsworth, Elizabeth. (1989). Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. Harvard Educational Review, 59, 297-324.

Gaber-Katz, Elaine & Watson, Gladys M. (1991). The land that we dream of . . . A participatory study of community-based literacy. Toronto: OISE Press.

Gardner, Sandra, Dean, Cynthia, & McKaig, Deo. (1989). Responding to differences in the classroom: The politics of knowledge, class, and sexuality. Sociology of Education, 62, 64-74.

Gaskell, Jane & McLaren, Arlene. (Eds.). (1987). Women and education: A Canadian perspective. Calgary: Detselig Enterprises.

Gore, Jennifer M. (1993). The struggle for pedagogies. New York: Routledge.

hooks, bell. (1988). Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black. Toronto: Between the Lines.

Horsman, Jenny. (1990). Something in my mind besides the everyday: Women and literacy. Toronto: Women's Press.

Lather, Patti. (1991). Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern. New York: Routledge.

Lewis, Magda. (1990). Interrupting patriarchy: Politics, resistance, and transformation in the feminist classroom. Harvard Educational Review, 60, 467-488.

Literacy and poverty: A view from inside. (1992). Ottawa: National Anti-Poverty Organization.

Lloyd, Betty-Ann. (1991a). Discovering the strength of our voices: Women and literacy programs. Toronto: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women.

——. (1991b, May, June). Learner-centred does not necessarily mean woman-positive: The experience in literacy programs. Paper delivered at the annual meetings of Canadian Women's Studies, Kingston, ON, and Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, Saskatoon, SK.

——. (1991c, November). Exploring the concept of woman-positive within learner-centred adult literacy programs. Dalhousie University Women's Studies Seminar Series, Halifax, NS.

——. (1992a). Learner-centred/woman-positive: Research with adult literacy programs. Women's Education des femmes, 9(3), 29-32.

——. (1992b). Women and literacy research highlights contradictions and contexts. Literacy/Alphabétisation, 15(4), 4-7.

——. (1992c). Why do we first have to deal with this question: "What about the men?" Pandora, 7(1), 10-11.

Luke, Carmen & Gore, Jennifer. (Eds.). (1992). Feminisms and critical pedagogy. New York: Routledge.

Luttrell, Wendy. (1989). Working-class women's ways of knowing: Effects of gender, race and class. Sociology of Education, 62, 33-46.

Mace, Jane. (1992). Talking about literacy: Principles and practice of adult literacy education. New York: Routledge.

MacKeracher, Dorothy. (1978). Roadblocks to women's learning: Issues for advocacy. Toronto: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women.

MacKeracher, Dorothy, et al. (1979). Adult basic education for women: A model for policy development. Toronto: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women.

Maher, Frances. (1987). Toward a richer meaning of feminist pedagogy: A comparison of "liberation" and "gender" models for teaching and learning. Journal of Education, 169(3), 91-101.

Mitchell, Candace & Weiler, Kathleen. (Eds.). (1991). Rewriting literacy: Culture and the discourse of other. Toronto: OISE Press.

Norris, Stephen P. & Phillips, Linda M. (Eds.). (1990). Foundations of literacy policy in Canada. Calgary: Detselig.

Organizing adult literacy and basic training in Canada. A policy and practice discussion document. (n.d.). Ottawa: Movement for Canadian Literacy.

Rich, Adrienne. (1979). Taking women students seriously. In Adrienne Rich, On lies, secrets and silence: Selected prose 1966-78 (pp. 237-245). New York: W.W. Norton.

Rockhill, Kathleen. (1987a). Gender, language and the politics of literacy. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 8, 153-167.

——. (1987b). Literacy as threat/desire: Longing to be SOMEBODY. In Jane Gaskell & Arlene McLaren (Eds.), Women and education: A Canadian perspective (pp. 315-331). Calgary: Detselig.

——. (1989a). e-MAN-ci-patory literacy: An essay review of Literacy: Reading the word and the world. Canadian Woman Studies, 9(3 & 4), 113-115.

——. (1989b). The other city . . . Where no one reads . . . Canadian Woman Studies, 9(3 & 4), 5-9.

Telling Our Stories Our Way: A guide to good Canadian materials for women learning to read. (1990). Toronto: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women.

Weiler, Katherine. (1988). Women teaching for change: Gender, class and power. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.

Wismer, Susan. (1988). Women's education and training in Canada: A policy analysis. Toronto: Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women.

Women, literacy and action: A handbook. (1991). Toronto: Ontario Literacy Coalition.

Research design and methodology

Anderson, Kathryn & Jack, Dana C. (1991). Learning to listen: Interview techniques and analyses. In Sherna Berger Gluck & Daphne Patai (Eds.), Women's words: The feminist practice of oral history (pp. 11-27). New York: Routledge.

Barnsley, Jan & Ellis, Diana. (1992). Research for change: Participatory action research for community groups. Vancouver: Women's Research Centre.

Barnsley, Jan & Ellis, Diana, with Jacobson, Helga & Dahl, Cheryl. (1987). Action research for women's groups. Vancouver: Women's Research Centre.

Brown, L. David & Tandon, Rajesh. (1983). Ideology and political economy in inquiry: Action research and participatory research. The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 19(3), 277-294.

Fine, Michelle. (1992). Disruptive voices: The possibilities of feminist research. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Fonow, Mary Margaret & Cook, Judith A. (1991). Beyond methodology: Feminist scholarship as lived research. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Glaser, Barney & Strauss, Anselm. (1976). The discovery of grounded theory. Chicago: Aldine.

Hunt, David. (1987). Beginning with ourselves: In practice, theory, and human affairs. Cambridge, MA: Brookline.

Jacob, Evelyn. (1988). Qualitative research traditions: A review. Review of Educational Research, 58, 1-50.

Kirby, Sandra & McKenna, Kate. (1989). Experience Research Social change: Methods from the margins. Toronto: Garamond Press.

Kolb, David A. (1984). Experiential learning. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Lather, Patti. (1991). Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern. New York: Routledge.

Maguire, Patricia. (1987). Doing participatory research: A feminist approach. Amherst, MA: The Center for International Education, School of Education, University of Massachusetts.

Marshall, Catherine & Rossman, Gretchen B. (1989). Designing qualitative research. London: Sage Publications.

McNiff, Jean. (1988). Action research: Principles and practice. London: MacMillan Education.

Owens, Robert. (1982). Methodological rigour in naturalistic inquiry: Some issues and answers. Educational Administration Quarterly, 18(2), 1-21.

Smith, Dorothy E. (1986). Institutional ethnography. Resources for Feminist Research, 15(1), 6-13.

Stanley, Liz. (Ed.). (1990). Feminist praxis: Research, theory, and epistemology in feminist sociology. New York: Routledge.

Feminist theory

Baxter, Sheila. (1988). No way to live: Poor women speak out. Vancouver: New Star Books.

Collins, Patricia Hill. (1990). Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment. New York: Harper Collins Academic.

Fraser, Nancy. (1989). Unruly practices: Power, discourse and gender in contemporary social theory. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Frye, Marilyn. (1983). The politics of reality: Essays in feminist theory. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.

——. (1992). The willful virgin: Essays in feminism. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.

Griffin, Susan. (1982). The way of all ideology. In Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo & Barbara C. Gelpi (Eds.), Feminist theory: A critique of ideology (pp. 273-292). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

hooks, bell. (1990). Yearning: Race, gender, and cultural politics. Toronto: Between the Lines.

Jaggar, Alison M. (1989). Love and knowledge: Emotion in feminist epistemology. In Alison M. Jaggar & Susan R. Bordo (Eds.), Gender/body/knowledge: Feminist reconstructions of being and knowing (pp. 145-171). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Lather, Patti. (1991). Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern. New York: Routledge.

Lorde, Audre (1985). Sister outsider: Essays and speeches. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.

Lugones, Maria C. & Spelman, Elizabeth V. (1986). Have we got a theory for you! Feminist theory, cultural imperialism and the demand for "The Woman's Voice." In Marilyn Pearsall (Ed.), Women and values: Readings in recent feminist philosophy (pp. 19-31). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Smith, Dorothy E. (1981). The experienced world as problematic. University of Saskatchewan, Sorokin Lectures, #12, 7-10.

——. (1987). The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Welch, Sharon. (1991). An ethic of solidarity and difference. In Henry Giroux (Ed.), Postmodernism, feminism, and cultural politics: Redrawing educational boundaries (pp. 83-99). New York: State University of New York Press.

Wise, Sue. (1990). Becoming a feminist social worker. In Liz Stanley (Ed.), Feminist praxis: Research, theory and epistemology in feminist sociology (pp. 236-249). London: Routledge.

Young, Iris Marion. (1990). Justice and the politics of difference. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

CCLOW Membership

Membership Fees (GST included)	
Low income/student/unemployed/underemployed/retired	$ 10.70
Individual	$ 30.70*
Sustaining Member	$250.70**
Organization with an annual budget up to $100,000	$ 48.25
Organization with an annual budget $100,000 to $500,000	$ 80.25
Organization with an annual budget over $500,000	$133.75
Associate Member (receives Women's Education des femmes only)	
Individual	$ 18.19
Organization	$ 32.10

* A $20.00 income tax receipt will be issued.
** A $240.00 income tax receipt will be issued.
Additional donations will be receipted for income tax purposes.

Enclosed, payable to CCLOW, is my cheque for:
Membership $________
Additional Donation $________
TOTAL $________

Charitable number:
0615-179-21-13

Please return form and payment to CCLOW
47 Main Street, Toronto, Ontario, M4E 2V6 416-699-1909 (phone) 416-699-2145 (fax)

Name________________ Organization________________

Address________________ Postal Code________

Telephone (Home)__________ (Business)__________ (Fax)__________

Occupation________________

Area of Interest________________

[ ] I do not give CCLOW permission to trade or sell my name and address to other like-minded social action groups for the purpose of fundraising or as a means of networking.

- **Women's Education des femmes**, a feminist connection to the world of learning and education, is published quarterly by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women, a national organization that promotes feminist education and the empowerment of women. ISSN 0714-9786

- **Telling Our Stories Our Way — A guide to good Canadian materials for women learning to read** features reviews of selected books and pamphlets of special interest to women learning to read. Materials reviewed include stories, personal accounts, biographies, poetry, information books on health, birth control, and different kinds of work. Students and literacy workers wrote the reviews. $5.00 (members) and $8.00 (non-members). Please add 7% GST and 10% mailing.

For two years, 30 women from across Canada took part in a program-based action research project that asked the question — What happens when some women in an adult literacy or basic education program decide to do something they define as woman-positive? Three books tell the stories of their experiences.

The power of woman-positive literacy work — Program-based action research

Betty-Ann Lloyd with Frances Ennis and Tannis Atkinson
8.5 x 11" — 256 pages — 70 photographs

This book provides the background for the research, details the research process, and describes each program, its community, and woman-positive activity. It contains a collaborative analysis and makes a series of recommendations for program planning, professional education, provision of support services, coalition building, and policy analysis and development.

Women in literacy speak — The power of woman-positive literacy work

Edited by Betty-Ann Lloyd with Frances Ennis and Tannis Atkinson
8.5 x 11" — 188 pages — 23 photographs

The women involved in this project documented their experience in many different ways. This book includes six materials written by students and staff, five reflective and analytic articles, two adaptations of interviews and journals, a policy paper, a story suitable for use as curriculum, and a summary of the research process, collaborative analysis, and recommendations.

Listen to women in literacy — The power of woman-positive literacy work

Tannis Atkinson with Frances Ennis and Betty-Ann Lloyd
8.5 x 11" — 100 pages — 26 photographs

This book has been written and designed for use by intermediate and advanced students in adult literacy and basic education programs. It is based on material from the two other books.

All bookstore, library, academic, and course orders please contact **Fernwood Books —**
Box 9409, Stn A, Halifax, NS B3K 5S3 • 902-422-3302 (phone) • 902-422-3179 (fax)

CCLOW Order Form **Purchase order #** ____________

Name ____________ Phone ____________ Fax ____________

Address ____________ Postal Code ____________

Discount price — CCLOW members, adult literacy students and programs, community-based organizations

	Regular	Discount	Mailing	Sub-total	GST 7%		Total
• The power of woman-positive literacy work	18.00 x ___	12.00 x ___	2.00 x ___	___	+ ___	=	___
• Women in literacy speak	15.00 x ___	10.00 x ___	2.00 x ___	___	+ ___	=	___
• Listen to women in literacy	8.00 x ___	5.00 x ___	1.50 x ___	___	+ ___	=	___
• All three books	38.00 x ___	25.00 x ___	5.00 x ___	___	+ ___	=	___
• Discovering the strength of our voices [Exploratory phase one report]	8.00 x ___	5.00 x ___	1.50 x ___	___	+ ___	=	___
					TOTAL		___

Send to CCLOW • 47 Main Street, Toronto, ON M4E 2V6 • 416-699-1909 • 416-699-2145 (fax)

Feminist Literacy Workers' Network

At the Literacy 2000 Conference in New Westminster, BC, October 1990, a group of women asked the support of the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) in forming a network for all women working in the field of literacy, whether they be students, workers, researchers, or volunteers. The main goals were to:

- create a feminist literacy workers' network
- organize a national conference on feminism and literacy

The Feminist Literacy Workers' Network was born. A conference was held on May 15-17, 1992, at the University of British Columbia. During the discussions the objectives of FLWN were stated as:

- to be a national voice for women's literacy
- to coordinate with other groups to lobby for funding and improved access for women
- to raise awareness of feminist issues
- to promote feminist analysis
- to build a strong FLWN national network
- to provide on-going personal and professional support for FLWN members (including volunteers)
- to explore the possibility of forming a union
- to support women learners
- to promote feminist literacy research on topics such as: women's ways of knowing, feminism across cultures and classes, violence against women, language, and imagery.

If you would like to join FLWN, please send the following form to CCLOW —
47 Main Street, Toronto, Ontario, M4E 2V6
416-699-1909 (phone) 416-699-2145 (fax)

Name______________________________ Organization______________________________

Address____ Postal Code__________

Telephone (Home)______________ (Business)______________ (Fax)______________

Occupation____

Area of Interest____

[ ] I would like a copy of the founding conference report, A chance to talk.

Le Réseau d'action éducation femmes

Le Réseau national d'action éducation femmes est un organisme national voué à la promotion de l'éducation sous toutes ses formes, pour les femmes francophones du pays. L'Alphabétisation est un des dossiers priorisés au RNAÉF. En juin 1987, on assistait à la création du premier comité «ALPHA».

La participation des membres du comité à divers événements leur permit de constater que l'absence d'un mouvement canadien francophone en alphabétisation, aidait à nourrir l'isolement des intervenantes et intervenants préoccuppées-és par l'alphabétisation chez les femmes francophones du pays.

À partir de ces constats, le RNAÉF a organisé une rencontre nationale le 11 mai 1989 à Ottawa. Des intervenantes et des apprenantes de toutes les provinces du pays se sont donc réunies pour permettre au RNAÉF de mieux situer la problématique des femmes francophones face àl'alphabétisation et ce, à partir de ce qu'elles avaient à exprimer.

La rencontre nationale a démontré que l'analphabétisme des femmes est un problème tout à fait particulier. Les femmes ont besoin de facilités de transport et de services de garde. Au cours d'ateliers dont les horaires sont adaptés à leur disponibilité, elles ont également besoin de matériel et de situation d'apprentissage liés à leurs préoccupations.

Alors que les hommes sont enouragés à s'alphabétiser pour des raisons professionnelles, les femmes veulent souvent apprendre à lire, écrire et compter pour des motifs rattachés à leur rôle social de mère, d'éducatrice et de responsable de l'économie domestique au sein de la famille.

Suite aux recommandations de la rencontre nationale, le comité Alpha du RNAÉF a alors reçu le mandat de produire un guide à l'intention des formatrices, traitant de plusieurs aspects de l'alphabétisation. Ce guide intitulé «L'alphabétisation des femmes francophones, Guide àl'intention des formatrices» et publié en 1990, aide les formatrices dans leurs tâches quotidiennes auprès des femmes en démarche d'alphabétisation. Le guide vient d'être inclus dans la base de données «ERIC» (la deuxième plus grande en Amérique), créée par le Centre linguistique de Washington aux États-Unis.

Une recherche-action sur l'alphabétisation des femmes francophones et le milieu de travail a été complétée en 1992 et ce projet a donné lieu à la création de deux documents: un recueil de textes, «Prenons la parole : des femmes francophones parlent d'elles» et un rapport d'enquête, «Pour les femmes francophones, l'alphabétisation en milieu de travail?». Le lancement officiel de ce dernier document inaugurait la Semaine national de l'éducation des femmes francophones 1992.

Le recueil de textes sert maintenant de matériel d'alphabétisation et de sensibilisation et le rapport d'enquête est destiné aux syndicats, au patronat et aux responsables de la formation professionnelle. Ces documents aident àdéfinir les conditions favorisant à la fois la participation des femmes francophones à des programmes d'alphabétisation et leur intégration au marché du travail.

Pour information:
Lisette Donovan, 50, rue Vaughan, Ottawa ON K1M 1X1

Discovering the strength of our voices:

Women and literacy programs

This is the report of the first phase of CCLOW's research into the experience of women in literacy programs. Researched and compiled by Betty-Ann Lloyd, this exploratory report documents the concerns and questions of women students and staff in four literacy programs across Canada.

- What is "learner-centred"?
- What is "woman-positive"?
- What can we learn by looking at how programs operate?
- What happens when we talk among ourselves as "women"?

To order:
send $5/copy (CCLOW members and community-based literacy programs)

or $8/copy (non-members and institutions) less 20% for orders of 5 or more to:

Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women

CCLOW
47 Main Street
Toronto, Ontario M4E 2V6
(416) 699-1909 phone
(416) 699-2145 fax

Women's EDUCATION *des femmes*

Education and learning from a feminist perspective

Published quarterly by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW), *Women's Education des femmes* is a feminist connection to the world of learning and education. Topics include: older women and education, women and girls in science, violence as a barrier to learning, woman-positive literacy, feminist pedagogy, anti-racist education, and much more. Partially bilingual, the magazine includes reviews, resource materials, interviews, poetry, commentary, and an agenda of upcoming activities and conferences.

4 issues per year for $18.19 indiv.; $32.10 institution or organization (GST included). Send payment to:

CCLOW
47 Main Street
Toronto, Ontario M4E 2V6
(416) 699-1909 phone
(416) 699-2145 fax

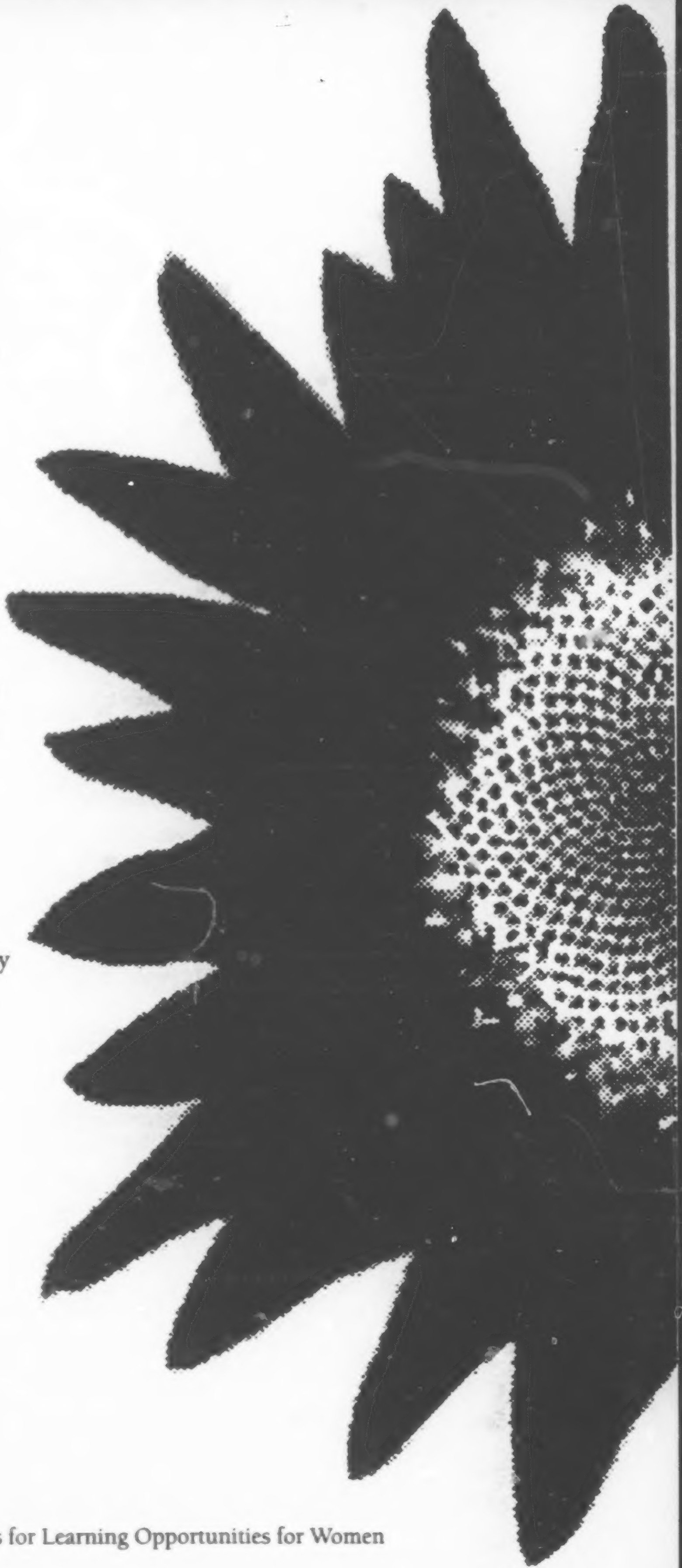
Women in literacy speak

Women from across Canada speak out about the year they spent planning, implementing, and documenting woman-positive activities within their adult literacy and basic education programs. They explore the concept of woman-positive within learner-centred programs — forming women's groups, developing sexual harassment policies, advocating for core funding for projects that focus on gender, culture, and personal experiences that get in the way of learning.

Gaining confidence, taking chances, and making choices within the particular contexts of their lives, they chart the woman-positive ripples of their work. They demonstrate how women's lives are woven together, how they become resources for one another.

Uncovering fear and isolation, celebrating diversity and strength, they outline what happened for themselves and for others as they attempted to make space for woman-positive literacy work. These pieces test recipes for political action. They pursue a politics of talking and challenge others to consider the more than semantic differences between "woman-positive" and "feminist" practices.

ISBN 1-895686-37-7



Fernwood Publishing

CCLOW
Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women